

SAFE FROM THE START ACT (H.R 571)

Armed conflict, natural disasters and climate change often have the greatest impact on the poorest countries, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable, including women and girls. Global estimates indicate that nearly 70 million people are currently displaced around the world, and we are experiencing the largest refugee crisis in recorded history. On top of this, the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically impacted women and girls worldwide, putting those who are displaced at unique risk of harm.

Conditions in refugee camps and other displacement settings often expose women and girls to greater security risks due to issues such as inadequate lighting, lack of gender-appropriate sanitation facilities, and needing to travel long distances to access firewood, water or other basic commodities. Sexual exploitation and abuse by humanitarian personnel has also become a well-recognized concern, prompting action by the international community. COVID-19 has exacerbated these GBV protection risks, particularly as already stretched humanitarian resources[1] are spent on stemming the health crisis. An estimated 31 million additional cases of GBV could occur in six months of the COVID-19 lockdown and another 15 million more for each additional three months.[2]

Despite the acute impacts that emergencies have on women and girls, they are often excluded from leadership and decision-making roles when it comes to humanitarian response. Without their voices included in the design and implementation of humanitarian programs, the United States and others that generously provide humanitarian relief risk ignoring or exacerbating the needs of women and girls in our response efforts.

A Policy Solution to Address Gender-Based Violence in Humanitarian Emergencies

Safe from the Start is an existing program implemented by the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to prevent gender-based violence (GBV) in humanitarian emergencies and protect survivors or those at risk. This program supports necessary training, toolkits, personnel, and accountability measures to improve the ability of those who work in emergencies to adequately prevent and respond to GBV from the onset of the crisis. These types of programs are critically needed: nearly 1 in 5 women report experiencing sexual violence during a humanitarian emergency and the risks of domestic/intimate partner violence, child marriage, and human trafficking all increase during crises. [3] Despite this, only .12% of all humanitarian funding goes to address GBV. [4]

Stories from the Field:

Seno Wara lives in a refugee camp for Rohingya who have fled Myanmar. She says the living situation in the camp is dire. It is overcrowded, unsanitary, and the food rations are insufficient. She is also concerned with the uncertainty of the future and the safety of her daughters – particularly from human trafficking. Seno Wara has seen girls that were “forced or convinced” to leave the camp. As a result, she is afraid to send her children to school, worried they might be kidnapped. “Sometimes they [traffickers] get caught at the check post, but some leave silently,” Seno Wara says. **“Girls are trafficked, girls are tortured. We feel anxious.”**



The bill will ensure:

- Humanitarian response organizations are better equipped to prevent GBV and support survivors through training, guidelines, and the deployment of specialized experts to close gaps that make women and girls vulnerable to violence and abuse;
- Efforts are coordinated for greater efficiency and accountability of response and recovery efforts, and that humanitarian relief activities mitigate GBV risks from the very beginning;
- Girls and women who experience GBV during crises receive appropriate care and that survivors and those vulnerable to GBV have access to empowerment opportunities that will help them recover from or prevent GBV; and
- Local actors, including women’s groups and others from the impacted communities, have funding, support, and skills to help provide necessary care and lead efforts within their communities to prevent and respond to GBV.

Specifically, the Safe from the Start Act will:

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

H.R. 571 Original Sponsors

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