



# The impact of conflict and displacement on Sudanese refugee women in eastern Chad

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## Introduction

The ongoing armed conflict in Sudan between the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) has resulted in a large displacement crisis, affecting over 12.6 million people.<sup>1</sup> While the majority – around 8.5 million – remain internally displaced within Sudan, over three million have sought refuge in neighbouring countries, primarily Chad, Egypt, and South Sudan.<sup>2</sup> As of 26 May 2025, Chad is hosting 844,389 Sudanese refugees<sup>3</sup> – a number that rises daily.

As the violence continues to escalate, refugees face the grim prospect of prolonged displacement. This new wave of displacement compounds a longstanding refugee crisis in Chad, which has hosted Sudanese refugees since the 2003-2004

Darfur conflict. Chad, already home to an estimated 400,000 Sudanese refugees when the current Sudan conflict began in April 2023, is now sheltering more recently displaced people, some of them in the camps initially set up during the Darfur conflict.<sup>4</sup> This massive influx of refugees has placed significant strain on the country's limited resources and infrastructure, and, with funding falling behind, humanitarian programmes are struggling to address mounting, urgent needs.<sup>5</sup>

Women and children, who make up 89 percent of new arrivals in Chad, endure dire living conditions in the camps and face critical challenges in meeting their basic needs.<sup>6</sup> The circumstances surrounding displacement also involve specific challenges for humanitarian organisations, including providing women and children with access to maternal and

1 International Crisis Group, '[Sudan: A Year of War](#)', 11 April 2024 ; Hudson, C., Strucke, M., '[Sudan's Humanitarian Crisis: What Was Old Is New Again](#)', Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 17, 2024; UNHCR, '[Sudan situation](#)', last updated 24 March 2025.

2 UNHCR CHAD, '[Influx of Refugees from Sudan](#)', last updated 6 January 2025.

3 UNHCR, '[Sudan situation](#)', last updated 26 May 2025.

4 UNHCR, '[Sudan Regional Refugee Response 2024 \(Mid-Year update\)](#)', July 2024; Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) Luxembourg, '[Sudan war survivors in refugee camps in Chad](#)', News, July 2024.

5 Press release, '[Humanitarian needs in Sudan grow as funding gap widens, IFRC warns](#)', 10 Oct. 2023. IRC, '[IRC warns unfettered humanitarian access and scale-up of funding needed to avert catastrophic hunger crisis in Sudan](#)', Press Release, 25 March 2024.

6 UNHCR, '[Emergency situation in Chad: Update on arrivals from Sudan](#)', 14 July 2024.

child healthcare and education, psychosocial support, safeguarding them against sexual and gender-based violence, and preventing child labour. Given the continuous influx of displaced people arriving in the camps, the crisis is intensifying each day. The need for immediate, life-saving, and gender-responsive support is critical.

This policy brief draws on research conducted in eastern Chad in April and May 2024. This research examines the impact of armed conflict and displacement on women and girls in Chad, as well as the extent to which the humanitarian response in eastern Chad meets the needs and expectations of women and their communities. It focuses on the interplay between the impacts of armed conflict, displacement, and gender norms. While the vulnerabilities of displaced women and girls are significant, women in the camps also exercise agency – and the role they can play as active agents of positive change is considerable in the context of displacement. In examining these aspects, this research seeks to encourage humanitarian and development actors to adopt a systematic and evidence-based approach when designing and implementing responses that aim to address the needs and concerns of women and girls in conflict settings – in eastern Chad and beyond, as well as in other contexts affected by transnational conflict and displacement.

## Methodology

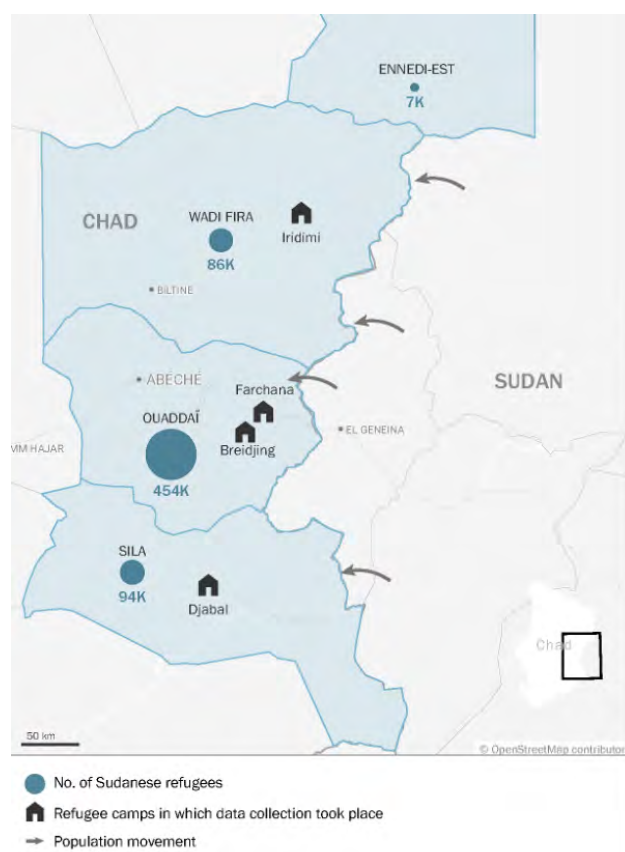
The research employed a mixed-methods approach to data collection that included a perception survey, qualitative key informant interviews, and focus group discussions. SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute) partnered with BUCOFORE, a local action research centre based in N'Djamena, Chad, with two of its female researchers and two female research assistants conducting the fieldwork.<sup>7</sup> Data were collected in the camps of Farchana and Breidjing in Ouaddai, Djabal in Sila, and Iridimi in Wadi Fira. These three regions host the largest refugee populations in Chad.<sup>8</sup>

The perception survey focused on three key issues: (i) the dynamics of the Sudan conflict; (ii) humanitarian responses to Chadian and Sudanese communities affected by the conflict; and (iii) the

threats, risks, and vulnerabilities facing women and girls during their flight and in the refugee camps. A fourth part of the survey, focused on social cohesion and gender norms, was specifically addressed to Chadian women residing in the camps.

Using quota sampling as a methodology to select the respondents, the survey was administered to three distinct demographic groups: newly arrived Sudanese refugees and Chadian returnees displaced by the ongoing conflict in Sudan; long-term Sudanese refugees displaced by the Darfur armed conflict in 2003–2004; and host community members in Chad. In total, the survey was administered to 264 women aged 18 or older.

To complement the findings of the perception survey, 41 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Sudanese refugees, Chadian returnees, Chadian residents, humanitarian workers and both local



**Figure 1. Data collection sites in eastern Chad, 2024.**

7 BUCOFORE is a local action research centre based in N'Djamena, Chad, and operating in Central and West Africa. The research centre specialises in issues of security and governance in development and humanitarian contexts. For more information: <https://www.bucofore.org/fr>.

8 Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) Luxembourg, 'Sudan war survivors in refugee camps in Chad', News, July 2024.

and traditional Chadian authorities. While the survey was strictly administered to women, interviews about the humanitarian and state responses were mainly conducted with men, as they were more frequently engaged in these roles. Four focus group discussions were also conducted with female Sudanese refugees. While some of the insights collected may be relevant to various humanitarian contexts, they are specifically drawn from the experiences of these groups within the four selected research sites.

## Main findings

### 1. Exposure to violence continues in camps

After fleeing a war zone, women continue to face a range of threats and risks along the perilous route to eastern Chad and upon arrival in the refugee camps. A quarter of the survey's respondents reported experiencing sexual violence or harassment back in Sudan, where the ongoing conflict is now often referred to as a 'war on women'.<sup>9</sup> Upon fleeing their homes and their country, their flight to safety is routinely marked by ethnic discrimination and a wide range of violent attacks, including physical assaults and sexual gender-based violence. These are a continuation of the threats women faced in Sudan, though at varying intensities.

Although the refugee camps offer residents a relative sense of safety, with 81 percent of women respondents reporting a decreased sense of fear, women continue to face multiple threats and risks within the camps themselves. Dire living conditions (namely, insufficient lack of food and water), in addition to a lack of infrastructure and basic services, expose women to similar risks they faced in Sudan. The survey's findings indicate that 34 percent of women residing in the camps have been exposed to psychological violence and 33 percent to physical violence, while 22 percent report harassment.

Ethnic discrimination remains a persistent threat. The intersecting identities of Sudanese refugee women – such as their gender, age, ethnicity, and refugee status – compound their vulnerability, placing them at greater risk of violence, exploitation, and marginalisation. The findings highlight the trauma and widespread psychological and physical abuse Sudanese women and girls endure during displacement. The violence experienced by refugees trying to reach the camps in Chad only makes them more

vulnerable, underscoring the need to address the traumas by ensuring protective measures, psychosocial support, and provision of adequate services to newly arrived refugees.

### 2. Food, water, and hygiene needs are paramount

The limited availability of basic services exacerbates the vulnerabilities of women and girls, increasing the likelihood that they will be exposed to physical violence, sexual exploitation, and harassment. Women in the camps have identified food and nutrition, as well as water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), as their most pressing needs, with 85 percent of survey respondents reporting a lack of these essentials.

The provision of food and water is a universal challenge in many humanitarian crises. However, limited resources render women particularly vulnerable to the risks of violence due to normative gender roles and responsibilities. Fifty percent cite the lack of food as a key area for improvement. Women in Sudan and Chad are traditionally tasked with collecting water and firewood, which exposes them to safety risks as they venture out in isolated areas, alone and often fatigued. Many women carrying out these tasks report instances of psychological and physical violence: 59 percent when collecting firewood and 25 percent while fetching water. Given the high risk of rape and kidnapping in and around the refugee camps, mothers report living in constant fear for the safety of their daughters and thereby prevent them from moving outside of the camps.

Women report that humanitarian aid often fails to address their specific needs, overlooking the diversity of their experiences and cross-cutting factors, such as their gender, age, and previous socio-economic status, and assuming that most share the same needs. For many women, food and WASH are critical, but some also prioritise economic opportunities and education. While balancing these humanitarian needs within an emergency context may be challenging, improving communication with refugee women to better understand the obstacles they face is likely to provide humanitarian and development actors with key insights to ensure assistance that is both efficient and life-saving. Augmenting the lines of communication can involve setting up dedicated spaces and structures, and ensuring that women are aware of and able to use existing channels to reach out to humanitarian workers.

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9 ACAPS, 'Sudan: Impact of the war on women and girls', 23 Jan. 2024.; CARE International, 'Because they are women: How the Sudan conflict has created a war on women and girls', 11 Apr. 2024.

### 3. Gender-sensitive refugee interventions are critical to move from crisis to protection

When a humanitarian response fails to address the specific needs of women, it overlooks the consequences of inadequate assistance. In the four camps in eastern Chad where the research was conducted, the infrastructure in place is neither sufficient nor gender-responsive, leaving women disproportionately affected in some sectors. Although reliable access to resources – particularly food and WASH – is critical for all displaced persons, it is especially essential for women's health during menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth. Without a gender-sensitive response, women are not only lacking essential services, but also exposed to additional risks.

This reality underlines the complex challenges facing humanitarian responses, as different needs must often be addressed at the same time. Needs are not only linked to gender, but are also tied to cross-cutting factors such as age, socio-economic status, and economic opportunities. The life and experiences of each woman prior to being displaced partly explain how women prioritise their needs in situations of displacement.

The scarcity of resources and limited economic opportunities result in power imbalances and economic insecurity, leaving women exposed to abuse by those in control of resources, from other displaced persons and community members, to aid workers and predominantly men. Because the lack of economic opportunities in the camps has immediate and far-reaching effects, women rank employment as their second most pressing need after food. While finding a job within the camps is a challenge for all displaced persons, qualified Sudanese women refugees who hold vital roles, such as nurses and teachers, are not allowed to practice in the camps when it could not only restore dignity but also meet basic needs.

Only 32 percent of the surveyed women had received psychological support since arriving in Chad, and less than half had received menstrual hygiene products (46 percent). In addition, only 16 percent of women had received assistance in the form of cash transfers; 16 percent had access to economic opportunities; 29 percent had received legal assistance or access to justice; 35 percent had received protection services (such as child

protection and prevention of SGBV); and 44 percent had had access to education.

Limited access to education for girls and women further exacerbates their vulnerability in this situation. By focusing on protection, and thus failing to implement a gender-responsive approach that acknowledges the agency of women, humanitarian assistance may indirectly and unintentionally reinforce power imbalances and unequal gender norms. Access to education was a recurrent theme among those interviewed, often brought up by young girls who had been forced to abandon their studies because of the war, fearful that they would not find opportunities in Chad, even outside of the camps. Education is seen as a priority among respondents, but access remains very limited due to the lack of schools in the camps. The lack of or limited access to education for girls who might be at risk of being excluded due to economic pressures or security concerns can entail long-term societal implications, such as holding girls back from any kind of social mobility or advancement. Access to education also presents a major obstacle for Chadian returnees. Only 27 percent of this group said they had access to education, in sharp contrast to 50 percent of Sudanese refugees. This gap reveals the systemic barriers Chadian returnees face in rebuilding their lives, particularly in terms of providing their children and young adults with the education they need to regain a sense of normalcy and to re-assimilate into a country they many left years ago.

Access to medical assistance is also inadequate; respondents reported people dying due to lack of care, including children suffering from malnutrition. Other types of assistance, such as psychosocial support, are also lacking in the camps. Nearly 70 percent of the surveyed women had not received psychological support since arriving in Chad, and more than half – 54 percent – had not received menstrual hygiene products.

### 4. Humanitarian response hindered by chronic underfunding

The capacity of the humanitarian sector to address urgent needs related to food security and access to healthcare, WASH, and shelter in eastern Chad is severely constrained by limited funding, overcrowded camps, and the rapid influx of displaced people since April 2023. The primary challenge, though, is that available funding cannot keep up with the rapid escalation of needs, creating gaps in

assistance and failing to protect refugee women in particular.<sup>10</sup>

84 percent of the long-term women refugees who participated in the survey said they were given shelter when they arrived in Chad, compared to only 56 percent of recently displaced respondents. While it is difficult to compare the level of assistance provided to displaced persons over time given factors such as the context in Chad, the humanitarian landscape, the varying levels and scope of needs, and the ongoing influx of refugees and returnees, the funding gap clearly represents the primary cause of insufficient assistance to the newly arrived. In addition, 88 percent of long-term women refugees said they had received medical assistance, compared to 57 percent of the respondents who had been recently displaced. Similarly, 55 percent of long-term refugees said they received psychological support on arrival, in sharp contrast to the mere 9 percent of those displaced by the most recent conflict; 91 percent said they had received hygiene products, compared to only 36 percent of the recently displaced respondents; and 75 percent said they had received menstrual kits, compared to just 16 percent of the respondents who had recently arrived in the camps.

## 5. Camps are overcrowded, with inadequate infrastructure

The overcrowded camp infrastructure in eastern Chad, originally established to accommodate refugees in 2004, exacerbates refugee women's vulnerabilities.<sup>11</sup> Limited capacity, combined with the concentration of refugees and returnees in the region, has strained the ability of humanitarian actors, like the World Food Programme, to provide sufficient assistance to all those in need.<sup>12</sup> Although most refugees and returnees report having received aid upon arrival, the lack of sustained support means the initial aid is only a temporary relief and as their hardships persist, vicious cycles emerge in which the risks related to the lack of food and water – namely, bodily harm and sexual assault – are exacerbated by the lack of medical care.

## 6. Perspectives on aid equity and potential for tensions

While most respondents believe aid is delivered in an equitable and fair manner, this research shows there are still diverging perceptions of the equity of aid provision between long-term refugees and refugees who arrived recently. Although 74 percent of Sudanese women refugees report having received assistance on their arrival in the Chadian camps, 80 percent of long-term refugees express concerns over continued assistance, stating clearly that the amount of assistance is no longer enough to cover their basic needs. While 61 percent of the survey respondents – both Sudanese refugees and Chadian returnees – believed that humanitarian aid is distributed in a fair and equitable way, 39 percent do not share this perception. Among the respondents who believed aid was not equally distributed, 37 percent believed that not everyone in the camps had access to the same basic social services, 28 percent believed that certain women received more assistance than others, and 24 percent believed that newly arrived refugees were receiving more assistance than others. The perception of discrimination is more important among recently displaced refugees, particularly with regard to the availability of and access to basic services.

## 7. Humanitarian presence in camps is limited

The ability of humanitarian actors to respond to refugees' needs is linked to funding, which is currently low. While the majority of the women surveyed (73 percent) said they had not encountered any problems while dealing with aid workers, 20 percent reported not having any interactions with them and seven percent said they had experienced problems. However, to gain a better understanding of these interactions, closer inspection of the findings indicates that 69 percent of respondents – both Sudanese refugees and Chadian returnees – do not know how to contact international humanitarian organisations. A similar proportion of respondents did not know how to contact Chadian humanitarian organisations. Across camps in eastern Chad, many interviewees reported not seeing humanitarian actors at all. Shifting donor priorities and simultaneous humanitarian crises and armed conflicts have

10 UNOCHA Financial Tracking Services. 'Chad 2004, coordinated plan snapshot for 2004'; UNOCHA Financial Tracking Services, Tchad Plan de Réponse Humanitaire 2023.; UNOCHA Financial Tracking Services, 'Tchad Plan de Réponse Humanitaire 2023', Trends in coordinated plan requirements.

11 Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) Luxembourg, 'Sudan war survivors in refugee camps in Chad', News, July 2024.

12 World Food Programme, 'WFP races to preposition food in eastern Chad as funding crunch and looming rains threaten aid to Sudanese refugees', 12 Mar. 2024.



turned the armed conflict in Sudan into a ‘forgotten war’.

## 8. Gender roles upended by displacement

In the border regions of eastern Chad, armed conflict and displacement impact the everyday lives of women and girls, transforming gender roles in various ways. In many cases, women (particularly those with children) who embarked on the flight to eastern Chad without male relatives now face the challenge of providing for their families, with 32 percent of women now heads of their families. Many take on new responsibilities and roles, such as that of breadwinner and protector, in addition to their traditional tasks as caregivers. Women who travelled with their husbands or male relatives often find themselves in the camps alone, with children, as men tend to migrate for work, sometimes for extended periods.

For most Sudanese refugee women, regardless of their household composition in the camp, the experience of displacement is marked by a drastic lifestyle adjustment. Most of them (64 percent) came from urban areas, where they had access to urban infrastructure and services, including safe drinking water, electricity and food. The armed conflict in Sudan left them with no choice but to migrate and endure dire conditions, with many feeling a sense of powerlessness due to the fact that they – as mothers and caregivers – cannot provide for their children or relatives. Constrained mobility and limited privacy within the camps also represent major shifts in women’s lives. Restricted by various factors like insecurity, social norms, and logistical barriers, the reduced mobility these women now face not only hinders their freedom of movement, but also their capacity to access economic opportunities and improve their living conditions.

## 9. Rising refugee-host community tensions likely amid resource scarcity

The protracted displacement crisis poses significant challenges for the host population in eastern Chad, where infrastructure is limited and multidimensional poverty high.<sup>13</sup> With one of the largest refugee populations per capita in Africa, service provision and the availability of resources for host communities in eastern Chad are under pressure. Under these circumstances, the arrival of large numbers of displaced people, has the potential to create or fuel refugee–host tensions. Although most long-term

refugees (52 percent) and recently displaced refugees (40 percent) report ‘good relations’ with Chadian locals, Sudanese refugees overall report access to resources (48 percent) and access to land (23 percent) as the main potential triggers for tensions with local communities. This interconnectedness of challenges highlights the delicate balance necessary to maintain peaceful relations and foster social cohesion – one that entails a comprehensive approach addressing the urgent humanitarian needs of displaced communities and ensuring the long-term sustainability and resilience of both refugee and host populations.

# Policy implications and recommendations

## Strengthen gender responsiveness in humanitarian programming.

We have highlighted that the most pressing needs of displaced persons in eastern Chad are largely shared by both men and women. However, some needs are specific to women, with most reporting that the particular needs they have are not being adequately addressed. In the context of displacement, it is essential to address the distinct gendered needs of refugees, as well as their gender-specific vulnerabilities, including sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), limited access to reproductive health services and social pressure around traditional gender roles. The insights from our respondents about specific gendered challenges facing women and girls in the camps in relation to water, healthcare, and hygiene demonstrate that the infrastructure in place is not currently gender-responsive. However, beyond acknowledging gender disparities, intersecting identities – such as age, disability, ethnicity, social role, power dynamics, religion, etc. – should also be considered. Understanding how identities intersect would help humanitarian actors design more comprehensive protection programmes. Socio-economic and ethnic status shape the needs of the women, just as they influence how these women approach and benefit from humanitarian assistance.

**Address sexual and gender-based violence.** The significant incidence of sexual violence in the camps underscores the need for urgent protective measures and recovery services that ensure both immediate safety for women and girls, as well as long-term rehabilitation for victims. Prevention must be built on

13 World Bank, Chad, Special Chapter. ‘[Hosting Refugees in an Inclusive Manner, Economic Update April 2024](#)’. 2024.

early intervention – meaning when the camps are being set up – and can entail the creation of safe spaces and separate hygiene areas in the camps, as well as sufficient lighting at night. Such measures would also help decrease certain risks associated with women’s movements – for example, leaving the camp to collect wood, which is considered an activity that involves a high risk of sexual violence. Services should include psychosocial support, medical care, legal assistance, and safe shelter. Accounts of rape-related pregnancies highlight the lack of care, the risks to women’s health, and the social consequences for the children. The presence and involvement of female humanitarian staff is also critical. Prevention needs to target men and boys – not only as potential perpetrators, but also as potential victims – to raise awareness of behaviours and social norms that perpetuate violence, sexual stereotypes, and power dynamics. To achieve this in a conflict-sensitive manner, humanitarian organisations must build proper infrastructure and ensure their staff are properly trained according to predetermined requirements.

#### **Prioritise work opportunities for displaced women.**

In displacement contexts, women have limited access to economic resources and income-generating opportunities. The lack of economic opportunities entrenches the vulnerability of women refugees, leaving them exposed to abuse and exploitation. Livelihood programmes implemented by NGOs can contribute to supporting the everyday needs of these women, while protecting them from exploitation and discrimination so they can become more self-sufficient. Beyond economic opportunities, refugee women need income-generating opportunities aligned with their educational backgrounds and professional training. Women could effectively contribute to the provision of services within the camp, yet many who used to be nurses or teachers, for example, find themselves working on the land. Aligning income-generating opportunities with women’s existing skills and experience should be a basic principle in humanitarian responses – one that enables these women to not only continue their vocational activities, advance their skills, and practice their professions and crafts, but also to fulfil needs in the camps.

**Fund the humanitarian response to match the scale of the crisis.** The lack of humanitarian funding puts thousands of lives at risk, and the seriousness of the Sudanese crisis warrants a coordinated and international humanitarian response. The high number of refugees in eastern Chad puts pressure on neighbouring states at the security, economic and social levels. The international community must

act decisively to support the millions of displaced people at risk of starvation. Funding shortages also stand as a major obstacle impeding the work of humanitarian organisations: implementing a gender-responsive approach requires resources, time, and trained staff. The work of national and international humanitarian organisations in Chad is appreciated, but the lack of resources leads to inconsistent programmes and unmet needs, leaving displaced children without schooling and vulnerable people without care. The budget cuts in the United States – and, to a lesser extent, the reduction of development aid by European countries, combined with the reorientation of their priorities – are contributing to additional difficulties and condemning the most vulnerable to the worst of fates.

## About the author

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## About SIPRI

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) is an independent international institute dedicated to research into conflict, armaments, arms control, and disarmament. Established in 1966, SIPRI provides data, analysis and recommendations, based on open sources, to policymakers, researchers, media and the interested public. SIPRI's work in Africa spans several regions and tackles many cross-cutting themes—including security, governance, conflict prevention, peacekeeping and peacebuilding.

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