

Aftershocks: The Toll of United States Funding Cuts on Displaced Women and Girls in Myanmar's Polycrisis

Background

In March 2025, Myanmar—already in the throes of a brutal civil war—faced two more devastating blows. On March 28, two **earthquakes** registering at magnitudes 7.7 and 6.4 struck, killing 3,800 people and injuring more than 5,000. As a **result of the disaster**, 207,000 people have been displaced from their homes and 6 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance—on top of a staggering 20 million people in urgent need of aid amidst the conflict.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, speaking to reporters in Brussels, United States Secretary of State Marco Rubio **said**, “[The United States] will provide humanitarian assistance just like everybody else does, and we will do it the best we can,” while expressing that “we also have other needs we have to balance that against.” He continued, “We’re going to do our part. We already have people there; we’ll have more people there. We’ll help as much as we can.”

Two months out—despite Rubio’s promises—the United States is essentially nowhere to be found. Innocent people are paying the price—especially women and girls. At the same time, these same women and girls are working tirelessly to save lives and rebuild their communities, all while fighting for their fundamental freedoms.

The international community has a responsibility to support them. Donors must prioritize funding for local women-led organizations and take steps to mitigate the weaponization of aid by the State Administration Council (SAC), the military junta ruling Myanmar. Governments must exert diplomatic pressure on the junta to immediately end all forms of violence, including gender-based violence (GBV) and the targeting of women human rights defenders, and allow safe, sustained, and unfettered humanitarian access to all communities in need across Myanmar. Governments in the region and beyond must increase safe pathways to asylum for individuals fleeing the crisis, and ensure all refugees have access to legal protection, safe shelter, and healthcare, education, and livelihoods.

Gendered displacement and violence in Myanmar's civil war

Myanmar’s civil war began following a 2021 military coup. The violent repression of democratic protests was followed by escalating conflict between the Myanmar Armed Forces (MAF) and varied armed groups which has impacted **12 out of 15 states in Myanmar**. Some 3.5 million people are **internally displaced**, forced from their homes by a massive aerial bombing campaign and widespread armed conflict, including systematic attacks to terrorize civilians.

In states like Rakhine, new waves of conflict compound decades of violence and displacement for the Rohingya population. Activists, organizations, and networks led by women play leading roles in the opposition and have been at the forefront of the humanitarian response to the war. For its part, the junta has **systematically targeted dissidents** with GBV, including conflict-related sexual violence

and torture. There are also reports of [opposition forces](#) committing sexual and gender-based violence.

Ongoing conflict dynamics and damage have weakened critical infrastructure across Myanmar, exacerbating humanitarian needs and impeding the humanitarian response. Efforts to deliver aid to earthquake survivors in opposition-controlled territories are being actively obstructed by the junta. Hostilities are ongoing, with [ceasefires having little to no effect](#). Care for survivors of sexual violence—alongside other sexual and reproductive health services—is lifesaving, yet very often [unavailable](#) to the people of Myanmar. It is estimated that nearly 70 percent of health workers had fled the country in the aftermath of the 2021 coup, and the conflict—including deliberate strikes on health facilities—has effectively [dismantled the health system](#).

Women and girls face heightened and disproportionate risks after the earthquakes

UNFPA estimates that more than [200,000 pregnant women and girls](#) have been affected by the earthquakes. Millions of people are without adequate shelter—with many sleeping in the open. Even prior to the earthquake, the overwhelming majority of internally displaced people were living in insecure and informal shelters and settlements.

Without access to safe housing and sanitation facilities, sexual and gender-based violence—already on the rise amidst conflict, displacement, and economic stressors—has skyrocketed. As people struggle to find [food, water, and shelter](#), risks of [sexual exploitation, child marriage](#), human trafficking, and intimate partner violence are all on the rise, with [devastating consequences](#)—compounding the violence women and girls face amidst the war. The Rohingya community is doubly [vulnerable](#), facing persecution, genocide, and gendered violence against the backdrop of the civil war.

US aid cuts have abandoned women and girls in Myanmar

The United States—a leading force in global relief just months ago—has been notably absent from the humanitarian response. When earthquakes struck Türkiye and Syria in 2023, the US pledged [US\\$185 million](#) to the humanitarian response, and immediately deployed [two Disaster Assistance Response Teams](#) with more than 150 specialized rescue workers to Türkiye.

By comparison, the Trump administration initially [pledged](#) just \$2 million assistance following the earthquakes in Myanmar, later increasing this to \$9 million, and deployed only three USAID staffers—a shamefully inadequate response to a crisis of this magnitude. Moreover, within days of their arrival, the staffers were reportedly notified that they would be [laid off](#) in the coming months as part of the current administration’s [dismantling of USAID](#). To date, the US has contributed just \$1 million to the [Myanmar Earthquake Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan](#) (HNRP).

The impact of the funding cuts is not restricted to insufficient humanitarian aid. Just days prior to the earthquakes, on March 24, the Trump administration published a list of cancelled grants—which reportedly included a projected \$259 million in funding for Myanmar in 2025. Cancelled grants include \$8 million for acute child malnutrition services for displaced families, \$7.5 million for health services for conflict-affected communities, and a \$3.8 million grant to support survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. The World Food Programme announced that 1 million vulnerable people in Myanmar would have their food assistance **completely cut** due to funding shortfalls.

While only 26 percent of girls in Myanmar complete high school, the Trump administration has also **cut \$70 million in education funding** for Myanmar. One local organization, which provides school lunches to female students to support girls staying in education, had their awards **suspended** and were asked by USAID “to remove any mention of ‘girls,’ ‘women,’ ‘youth,’ ‘equity,’ or ‘inclusion’” in their grant and program materials as part of the US administrations crackdown on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Human Rights Myanmar reports that \$45 million dedicated to independent media and programming to **promote democracy and human rights** was also cut.

The US government’s hasty exit leaves enormous funding gaps. The **2025 UN humanitarian response plan** for the war in Myanmar—separate from the earthquake response—has secured a paltry 8 percent of the funds required. In 2024, the plan was 39 percent **funded**, with the United States contributing 30 percent of the total \$391 million. The United States was also the largest contributor to the **Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis Joint Response** plan in 2024, funding over half of the \$582.4 million. Women-led organizations (WLOs) have been hit particularly hard by US funding cuts. Globally, nearly 50 percent of WLOs may be forced to shut down within six months if funding is not resumed. Organizations like the Myanmar Ethnic Women Refugee Organization report having fewer shelters to refer refugee women and GBV survivors to, and that funds used to provide vulnerable refugee women with **essential monthly stipends** are rapidly drying up.

The international community is failing the women and girls of Myanmar. Two months after the earthquakes, the worst-affected communities are still without essential health services or a safe place to **sleep**. To date, the UN **humanitarian response plan** to respond to the earthquakes has received just 22 percent, or \$60 million, of the \$275 million required.

While the United States is no longer investing in saving lives and fighting for democracy and fundamental freedoms, the women of Myanmar continue to fight. Diverse civil society organizations—including WLOs, organizations of people with disabilities, youth, and LGBTQTI+ organizations—are leading GBV prevention and response and other humanitarian and resistance efforts. The international community must take immediate action to safeguard and support these organizations, which are doing all they can in impossible circumstances to save communities and lives.

Recommendations

Donors should:

- **Immediately fund the Myanmar Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan.**
- **Direct rapid, long-term, and flexible funding to civil society and community-based organizations, especially women-, youth- and LGBTQI+ led organizations.** Women-led organizations provide critical protection and empowerment services for displaced women and girls. These organizations are already responding on the ground, and have the knowledge, expertise, and relationships to deliver safe and effective assistance to their communities. Engaging organizations led by and comprising diverse community members ensures a more equitable response that addresses the unique risks and needs of different community groups.

Governments should:

- **Exert diplomatic pressure on the ruling junta to:**
 - Fully adhere to international human rights and humanitarian law and the full implementation of [UN Security Council Resolution 2669](#) (2022), including an immediate end to all forms of violence; respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law; and the immediate release of all arbitrarily detained prisoners.
 - Ensure safe, sustained, and unfettered humanitarian access to all impacted communities, and the protection of medical personnel, humanitarian workers, and human rights defenders.
- **Provide safe pathways to asylum and refugee protection, particularly for women, LGBTQI+ and ethnic and religious minorities.** All asylum seekers from Myanmar must be afforded access to asylum. Countries in the region receiving refugees from Myanmar must provide safe shelter and access to healthcare, education, and livelihoods. The return of refugees to Myanmar must meet international standards and be safe, informed, dignified, voluntary and durable. The United States should also extend Temporary Protected Status for people from Myanmar when it expires in November 2025.

Practitioners should:

- **Work with local partners to ensure the safest, most effective mechanisms to protect partners and enable aid to reach those most in need.** The junta is weaponizing humanitarian assistance, refusing to allow or deliver aid in opposition-held areas of the country.
- **Integrate GBV risk mitigation across all programming.** Implementing organizations working in Myanmar must ensure adherence to the [Inter-Agency Minimum Standards for GBV](#) and [IASC Guidelines for Integrating GBV Interventions](#). Practitioners across all sectors should work to strengthen referral pathways for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.

- **Ensure availability of the [Minimum Initial Service Package \(MISP\) for Sexual and Reproductive Health](#).** The Health Sector must advocate for the provision of lifesaving sexual and reproductive health care, including emergency obstetric services, contraception, clinical care for rape survivors, and HIV prevention.
- **Provide technical support to efforts by local civil society and independent media outlets to document the impact of the earthquake on diverse communities, particularly women and girls, LGBTQI+ individuals, minority groups, and stateless and displaced communities.** Gender- and age-disaggregated data gathered by local actors will be crucial in preparing for effective emergency responses, designing responsive programming, and advocating for additional funding. The junta cannot be relied on as a credible source of information.

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Women's Refugee Commission

The Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) improves the lives and protects the rights of women, children, youth, and other people who are often overlooked, undervalued, and underserved in humanitarian responses to crises and displacement. We work in partnership with displaced communities to research their needs, identify solutions, and advocate for gender-transformative and sustained improvement in humanitarian, development, and displacement policy and practice. Since our founding in 1989, we have been a leading expert on the needs of refugee women, children, and youth and the policies that can protect and empower them. womensrefugeecommission.org.

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