



Submission - UN Calls for Inputs

4th Quarter, 2025

GEM Tigray

(Gender Empowerment Movement Tigray)

The Girl Child

Input to guidelines on child and forced marriage, HRC resolution 53/23.

Addressing Child and Forced Marriage in Tigray – Progress, Challenges, Lessons Learned and Guidelines

Child and forced marriage in Tigray is driven by deeply entrenched structural factors—poverty, harmful social norms, gender inequality, limited access to education, weak legal enforcement, and heightened insecurity—all of which have been drastically worsened by war, displacement, and famine. Attempts to address the problem through isolated interventions have shown limited impact, as they fail to shift the survival pressures and power dynamics that underpin the practice.

The evidence underscores the need for multi-sectoral, conflict-sensitive strategies that go beyond information-sharing or short-term incentives. Lessons from Tigray illustrate that fragmented approaches cannot sustainably reduce child marriage in conflict-affected settings. Instead, solutions must be holistic, locally driven, and sustained, addressing root causes simultaneously while responding to the unique challenges of war, displacement, and systemic breakdown.

A report by the New Lines Institute concludes that, “on the evidence currently available, there is a reasonable basis to believe that members of the ENDF, the Amhara Special Forces (“ASF”), and the EDF have committed genocide against Tigrayans.” In addition, Human Rights Watch concludes that ethnic cleansing took place in Tigray. Thus, this submission takes this evidence into consideration.

Addressing the Root Causes of Child and Forced Marriage

Single-component solutions and their limits

- Efforts to prevent child marriage often fail when they treat key drivers in isolation. In Tigray, these drivers—poverty, harmful social norms, gender inequality, loss of education, lack of enforcement of law, lack of effective prosecution policy and insecurity—have been drastically worsened by genocidal war and displacement.
- Awareness campaigns (radio spots, school talks, workshops) improve knowledge. However, these initiatives rarely shift entrenched power dynamics or survival incentives. In a region where households face hunger, awareness alone cannot prevent early marriage.
- Cash transfers and short economic incentives can delay marriage. However, they are unsustainable in Tigray’s collapsed markets, where there are livelihood challenges and food insecurity. Structural drivers persist.
- Girls-only clubs and mentoring programs help build resilience. However, these initiatives remain narrow in scope without engaging fathers, brothers, religious leaders, and customary authorities who hold significant influence.
- Legal reform (marriage age set at 18) and one-off enforcement campaigns have little impact when courts, police, and child protection systems are weakened by war and displacement.

- School-centered programs lose traction where 88% of schools have been destroyed or closed. In Tigray, incentives such as stipends or fee waivers are meaningless if schools are unsafe, non-functional, or lacking teachers.
- Short pilot projects, such as the Berhane Hewan program—successful in combining schooling support, girls’ groups, and community dialogue—have not scaled in Tigray due to resource scarcity and lack of institutional backing.

War-specific pressures

- The humanitarian collapse has created direct incentives for child marriage:
- Large internally displaced populations (IDPs), sometimes nearing a million, strain families.
- Severe food insecurity and hunger deaths may push households to see marriage as a survival strategy.
- Collapse of health and GBV services leaves girls unprotected.
- Sexual violence, often committed with impunity, may accelerate forced marriage.

Norms, Policies, and Programs to Counter Child Marriage

Legal frameworks

- Ethiopia’s Family Code sets the marriage age at 18, consistent with CEDAW and CRC obligations.

Community engagement

- Community-based programs have mobilized elders, religious leaders, and families to prevent child marriages. For instance, a program in Kola Tembein engaged 2,400 girls in dialogue and life-planning, shifting aspirations toward education.

Education initiatives

- The UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme has reached 145,000 Ethiopian adolescent girls, including in Tigray, with life-skills, reproductive health education, and school retention support.

National policy frameworks

- National Strategy and Action Plan on Harmful Traditional Practices (2013).
- National Costed Roadmap to End Child Marriage and FGM (2019)

Tigray regional policies

- The Bureau of Women's Affairs established a steering committee for child marriage prevention.
- Between 2005–2016, Tigray achieved a 38% reduction in prevalence among women aged 20–24.. This was mostly due to effective community mobilization & robust law enforcement by the government. However, these hard-won gains may have reversed in recent years
- due to the collapse of governance structures & social systems during & after the war.

Budgetary lagging

- Ethiopia's national budget has no publicly disaggregated figure specifically for child marriage. As a UNICEF 2022 report indicates, "Finding disaggregated expenditure data is challenging both at the regional and subnational levels. This is because the Government allocates funding on overall blocks of budget rather than an itemized costing framework."

- Tigray also lacks transparent budgetary allocations for child marriage programs, particularly post-war.

Supporting Survivors and At-Risk Girls

Effective responses

- Education and vocational training: These programs provide alternatives to marriage. However, with 88% of schools destroyed, their reach in Tigray remains extremely limited.
- Sexual and reproductive health services: UNFPA has worked to address survivors' needs, but humanitarian access restrictions have prevented scale-up.
- Legal and protection services: Community-led enforcement in Tigray has successfully stopped some marriages, but broader judicial collapse undermines access to justice.

Challenges

- Displacement: Families may see marriage as protective under displacement conditions.
- Cultural norms: Girls unmarried after 15 may be stigmatized, particularly in rural areas, undermining prevention.
- Resource constraints: Competing humanitarian priorities sideline long-term prevention programs.

Promising practices

- Community engagement: Working with leaders has shifted norms in some localities.
- Multi-sectoral approaches: Linking education, protection, health, and livelihoods offers more comprehensive support.
- Advocacy campaigns: Sustained messaging has started to challenge stigma and empower girls.

Innovative Strategies and the Role of Digital Technologies

Digital tools offer promise but face severe constraints in Tigray:

- Ongoing internet blackouts and restrictions during the war limit and limited outreach.
- Connectivity gaps: Rural areas lack reliable electricity or internet.
- Low digital literacy constrains use of apps or platforms for awareness or support.
- Furthermore, Tigray is a region within a country with a history of state surveillance and internet control.

Data Collection and Use in Policy

Tools used

- National DHS and MICS surveys: Provide prevalence data but lack timeliness or disaggregation for war-affected Tigray.
- Context analysis toolkits: Used by Plan International and UNHCR to assess drivers in crises.
- Community-based qualitative research: Focus groups, mapping, interviews give localized insight but are difficult to conduct during war, displacement, and in rural areas.

Challenges

- Displacement makes populations hard to track.
- Cultural sensitivity leads to underreporting.
- Data deficits: Gender, disability, and displacement-intersectional data is scarce.
- Ethical risks: Safety of respondents in insecure zones is difficult to guarantee.

Data informing policies

- The UNFPA-UNICEF Global Joint Programme in Tigray (launched 2017) used data to target specific districts with integrated interventions.
- However, infrastructure destruction and timeliness gaps limit the practical use of data for immediate policymaking.

Key lessons include:

- Single-component interventions are ineffective in crisis contexts; multi-sectoral, integrated, and long-term approaches are essential.
- Community engagement remains critical for shifting norms and ensuring enforcement is locally supported.
- Education and livelihoods must be rebuilt as core alternatives to marriage.
- Protection systems (legal, health, GBV services) must be restored and strengthened.
- Data systems require investment, ethical safeguards, and conflict- and displacement- sensitive methodologies to guide action.
- Digital innovations may offer solutions but cannot replace the rebuilding of basic services. Furthermore, Tigray is a region in a country with a history of state surveillance and internet control.

Suggested Guidelines

1. Adopt Multi-Component Approaches

- Integrate education, protection, livelihoods, and social norms work into one program cycle.

- Tailor programs to crisis conditions, including mobile schooling for displaced children, protection-linked cash transfers, and safe community spaces.
- Ensure long-term funding to move beyond short pilot projects, which often collapse after external support ends.

2. Rebuild and Strengthen Education Systems

- Repair damaged schools and ensure they are safe from violence and exploitation.
- Expand access for displaced children through temporary learning centers and mobile classrooms.
- Provide stipends, fee waivers, and school meals to offset financial barriers.
- Link education to future opportunities by integrating vocational training and livelihood pathways.

3. Support Household Livelihoods and Economic Security

- Introduce cash assistance linked to child protection, ensuring families can meet basic needs without marrying off daughters.
- Rehabilitate local markets and agriculture to restore family livelihoods.
- Target mothers and adolescent girls with vocational training in skills matched to local market demand.
- Establish savings and loan groups for women to diversify household incomes.

4. Engage Communities and Change Social Norms

- Involve religious and traditional leaders in advocacy, encouraging them to champion the legal marriage age and promote alternative rites of passage.
- Facilitate community dialogues that include fathers, brothers, and male peers alongside girls.

- Highlight role models—girls who continued education, or families who resisted early marriage pressures.
- Promote mass media and local radio programs that normalize girls' education and delay of marriage.

5. Strengthen Legal and Protection Systems

- Rebuild local justice institutions and provide training for police, prosecutors, and judges on child marriage laws.
- Establish child protection committees in IDP camps and rural communities to monitor and report cases.
- Guarantee safe reporting channels for girls at risk, with anonymity and survivor-centered support.
- Link enforcement to social services, ensuring that prevention does not criminalize families without offering alternatives.
- Ensure accountability for perpetrators of sexual violence and other atrocities as a key element of restoring trust in the justice system and a powerful deterrent against forced marriage.

6. Provide Comprehensive Survivor Support

- Expand access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services, including family planning, maternal health, and psychosocial counseling.
- Offer safe shelters and case management for girls escaping forced marriage.
- Put protective measures to ensure young girls are not tricked or bribed to go back to the family.
- Ensure access to education for married girls, including second-chance and accelerated learning programs.
- Provide livelihood and vocational training for survivors to achieve independence.
- Facilitate access to justice and legal remedies, while ensuring confidentiality and survivor centred protection.

7. Use Data to Drive Policy and Programming

- Invest in Tigray level surveys comparative to DHS and MICS.
- Conduct household surveys through local women's groups
- Integrate child marriage indicators into needs assessments
- Utilize community-based qualitative research to understand cultural drivers and hidden cases.
- Leverage digital tools (SMS surveys, mobile-based reporting) where connectivity allows and with prerequisite of privacy.
- Ensure disaggregation by age, gender, displacement status, and disability.
- Feed data into planning cycles, linking evidence to budgeting and monitoring of interventions.
- Ensure consent, safeguarding, and trauma-sensitive methods into data collection

8. Incorporate Digital and Innovative Solutions

- Pilot SMS-based awareness campaigns for communities with mobile access with prerequisite privacy.
- Greater focus on low-tech innovations (community radio, printed materials, solar learning kits) would align with Tigray's current infrastructure realities.
- Anonymized SMS platforms, data protection protocols, or diaspora-supported platforms outside Ethiopia's control are critical.
- Develop offline learning tools (solar-powered tablets, radio education) for girls cut off from school.
- Train community workers in digital data collection to improve monitoring.
- Explore safe helplines for reporting forced marriage cases, adapting to local connectivity realities.

9. Secure Long-Term Financing and Partnerships

- Integrate child marriage prevention into local, national, regional development plans and post-war recovery strategies.
- Mobilize donor funding for multi-year programs, rather than annual emergency cycles.
- Foster partnerships between local government, local NGOs, women's associations, and international agencies. Focusing at the local level is critical.
- Promote accountability through transparent budgeting and regular reporting on child marriage outcomes.

Submission to the OHCHR Special Rapporteur on the Sale and Sexual Exploitation of Children, Calls for Inputs Protecting Children from Sale, Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse

Executive Summary

Introduction

GEMTigray, a women-led organization based in Tigray, Ethiopia, submits this report to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Special Rapporteur on the Sale and Sexual Exploitation of women, in response to the *2025 Call for Inputs on Protecting Children from Sale, Sexual Exploitation, and Sexual Abuse* ([OHCHR, 2025](#)).

This submission focuses on Tigray, where the aftermath of war has created a fragile environment exposing children—especially girls—to severe forms of sexual violence, trafficking, forced labor, and exploitation.

The war in Tigray, which began in November 2020, resulted in widespread atrocities, including sexual slavery, systematic rape, and forced displacement, as documented by international human rights organizations. Sexual violence was used systematically and widely as a weapon of war against Tigrayan women and girls ([CITG, 2025](#)).

While global attention has faded since the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement in November 2022, the humanitarian and protection situation for children in Tigray remains catastrophic.

The Post-War Environment in Tigray

The post-war environment in Tigray is characterized by broken institutions, destroyed infrastructure, and lingering insecurity. Many communities remain isolated, and numerous children live in displacement camps under precarious conditions.

Gender-Based Violence and Its Intergenerational Impact

The use of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) during and after the war in Tigray has left deep, intergenerational scars. Hundreds of thousands of survivors, including girls, continue to face stigma, trauma, and lack of access to healthcare and justice.

The Joint OHCHR–Ethiopian Human Rights Commission investigation (2021) confirmed the widespread and systematic nature of sexual violence targeting Tigrayan women and girls (OHCHR–EHRC Joint Report, 2021).

Many survivors gave birth to children conceived through rape. These children face severe discrimination and neglect. Without targeted intervention, they are at risk of social exclusion and exploitation—both within IDP camps and within their communities

Breakdown of Family Structures and Rise of Child Vulnerability

Forceful and unconstitutional occupation by Amhara and Eritrean forces, accompanied by documented ethnic cleansing (HRW), have resulted in displacement and fractured traditional family and community safety networks. According to Save the Children, the war in Tigray has led to the separation of thousands of children from their families. (Save the Children, 2021).

Many still remain unaccounted for, some believed to have been trafficked internally or across borders. In some areas, boys as young as 12 have been recruited or coerced into informal labor, while girls are targeted for domestic servitude.

Post-war reconstruction has yet to prioritize child protection. Limited reintegration programs exist for unaccompanied minors, and most local administrations lack child welfare officers or safe houses. Community networks - strong in Tigrayan culture—have been eroded by prolonged violence and displacement.

Collapse of the Justice and Protection System

The destruction of legal institutions during the war has left children without recourse to justice. The institutions of police stations, courts, and shelters were fractured.

Tigray's child protection referral systems remain largely nonfunctional, with cases of GBV and trafficking often going unreported or unresolved.

Even in areas where police services have resumed, survivors fear retaliation or social stigma. For many children and adolescents, justice and accountability is absent—perpetuating a cycle of impunity and trauma.

Humanitarian Gaps and Underreporting

Accurate data on child sexual exploitation and trafficking in post-war Tigray remains scarce.

Humanitarian access restrictions during and after the war led to a data blackout—limiting the ability to assess the scale of child abuse, sale, and sexual exploitation.

This underreporting hides the true magnitude of child exploitation and makes it harder for survivors to receive services or justice.

Patterns of Child Exploitation and Emerging Risks in Tigray

Child Abuse in Displacement Camps

After ceasefire, more than a million people remain internally displaced in Tigray (OCHA 2024).

Displacement camps such as 70 Kare near Mekelle have become centers of acute vulnerability for children. Lack of adequate food, lighting, and security patrols exposes girls and unaccompanied minors. Hyena attacks are becoming common place. (Addis Standard, 2025)

Insecurity in the camps is further aggravated by the lack of police presence and the absence of trained protection officers. Camp committees—often run by volunteers—lack resources to investigate or prevent abuse.

Trafficking and Cross-Border Exploitation

As Tigray's borders reopened partially in 2023, child trafficking networks re-emerged along corridors toward Sudan and Djibouti.

<https://www.eepa.be/situation-report-leaked-report-on-human-trafficking-in-tigray-rival-factions-emerging-in-eritrea-ethiopia-tensions-us-sanctions-sudan-for-chemical-weapons-use/>

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps, often lacking adequate infrastructure and security, have become hotspots for trafficking activities. Poor lighting and damaged shelters make it easier for traffickers to abduct children, leading to instances of sexual exploitation and forced labor. The scarcity of essential services like food, water, and sanitation compels children to venture outside the camps, increasing their risk of abduction. (ECPAT, 2024)

Children are recruited with false promises of domestic work abroad, then sold into sexual servitude or forced labor.

Boys are smuggled across borders to work in farms or informal mining sites under dangerous conditions.

Because birth records and identification systems were destroyed during the war, traffickers easily falsify ages or identities.

Digital Exploitation and Online Grooming

As limited internet connectivity returns to Tigray, digital risks are emerging.

While access to online education and livelihoods is vital, it also exposes minors to online grooming, image-based abuse, and child sexual material.

Local law enforcement lacks cyber-crime units, and parents rarely have awareness or digital literacy training to identify risks.

Child Labor and Economic Exploitation

The economic devastation has forced many children into hazardous labor.

Common sectors include brick-making, street vending, and carrying water or firewood over long distances.

Such activities expose children—especially girls—to physical danger and sexual harassment.

Stigma, Silence, and Impunity

Cultural stigma and fear of retaliation continue to silence survivors.

Victims of sexual exploitation often face ostracism from their families, and in some cases, survivors are blamed for the abuse.

This stigma prevents reporting and reinforces impunity.

Emerging Threats: Displacement, Famine, and Climate Shock

The resurgence of famine conditions in parts of Tigray has intensified risks of child exploitation. ([Reliefweb, June 2024](#))

Starving families increasingly send children to urban centers in search of food, exposing them to traffickers and abusers.

Climate shocks—especially drought and flash floods—are also driving new waves of displacement.

Without targeted protection interventions, these overlapping crises deepen patterns of exploitation across generations.

The patterns outlined above illustrate a multifaceted and evolving crisis in Tigray:

- Conflict-related trauma has normalized exploitation and abuse.
- Displacement and poverty sustain vulnerability.
- Digital exposure introduces new threats with minimal safeguards.
- Justice and social systems remain incapacitated.

Protecting children in this context requires not only humanitarian assistance but a rights-based, survivor-centered approach anchored in justice, accountability, psychosocial recovery, and the rebuilding of local protection networks.

Gaps in Prevention, Response, and Justice Mechanisms

Weak Legal Enforcement and Justice Gaps

Despite existing frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) ([UN, 1989](#)), implementation in Tigray remains severely limited.

- Courts and police structures were destroyed or severely weakened during the war.
- Survivors face obstacles in filing complaints, including the need for protection against retaliation and the lack of child-sensitive procedures.
- Prosecutorial resources are concentrated in urban centers, leaving displaced or rural children without recourse.

Forensic documentation for conflict related sexual violence is extensive. These forensic documentation include Medical records & facility charts documenting genital and non-genital injuries, pregnancy after assault, surgical procedures, and long-term reproductive harm ([The Guardian, 2025](#)), Clinical forensic examinations (medico-legal reports) by health workers that describe acute anogenital trauma, scarring consistent with repeated assault, and injuries from insertion of foreign objects ([Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, 2024](#)), photographs and clinical imaging ([The Guardian, 2025](#)), Laboratory evidence: STI testing, HIV serology (including documented seroconversion after assault), and toxicology in some cases ([PMC, 2025](#)), and Consistent practitioner testimony and aggregated medical-record analysis: systematic reviews of hundreds of medical records and interviews with health workers (doctors, nurses, midwives) ([The Guardian, 2025](#)). Yet, perpetrators enjoy impunity with no prospect for justice and accountability.

Inadequate Child Protection Services

The collapse of Tigray's social service infrastructure has left children without essential protection and rehabilitation mechanisms:

- Health services: Many facilities were looted or destroyed during the war, limiting access to clinical management of rape (CMR), psychosocial support, and emergency contraception ([WHO, 2021](#)).

- Safe shelters: Some areas, particularly hard-to-reach areas, have limited access to child protection services. Only a few NGOs provide child-friendly spaces for survivors.
- Reintegration programs: Unaccompanied minors often return to communities without monitoring, follow-up, or psychosocial support, increasing risk of exploitation.

There is an urgent need to rebuild regional child protection mechanisms and integrate services into existing health, education, and social welfare platforms.

Underreporting and Data Gaps

Accurate monitoring of child exploitation remains extremely limited:

- Stigma and fear prevent survivors from coming forward.
- Age-disaggregated data is rare, making it difficult to identify the scale of exploitation among 0–4, 5–11, and 12–17-year-olds.
- NGO and clinic-based reporting captures only a fraction of actual cases.

For example, Commission of Inquiry for Tigray Genocide estimated that close to 300,000 women and girls were affected by genocidal sexual and reproductive violence. ([CITG, 2025](#)) while clinic records show children as a significant portion of survivors ([AP News, 2023](#)).

These gaps hinder evidence-based interventions, making resource allocation and accountability measures less effective.

Standardized GBV/child protection data systems with survivor consent, safe storage, and reporting protocols, as outlined in the GBVIMS Companion Guide is essential ([GBVIMS, 2022](#)).

Multi-Sectoral Response Gaps

Effective child protection requires integration across health, legal, psychosocial, and community systems, yet Tigray suffers from systemic fragmentation:

- Health and psychosocial services are unevenly distributed.
- Community-based child protection committees are inactive or understaffed.
- Coordination among humanitarian actors is limited, reducing response times.

Integrated child-sensitive GBV and health services are urgently needed, including:

- Clinical management of sexual assault.
- Pediatric psychosocial support.
- Forensic evidence preservation and referral to legal services.

WHO guidance emphasizes linking medical documentation to survivor-centered legal aid ([WHO, 2021](#)).

Cross-Border Protection Weaknesses

Children trafficked across the Ethiopia–Sudan–Eritrea corridor remain highly vulnerable:

- Mutual legal assistance mechanisms are weak or nonexistent.
- Cross-border referral pathways for minors are underdeveloped.
- Regional joint investigations rarely involve child protection specialists.

ICTJ guidance on cross-border prosecutions recommends establishing joint investigative/prosecutorial teams for trafficking and sexual exploitation cases ([ICTJ, 2006](#)).

Regional cooperation under the African Union Horn of Africa Initiative on Human Trafficking remains underutilized ([African Union, 2023](#)).

Accountability and Impunity

Impunity remains a major obstacle:

- Few perpetrators have been prosecuted.
- Survivors rarely receive reparations.
- State and non-state actors involved in wartime exploitation operate without scrutiny.

Global Protection Cluster (2024) notes that accountability mechanisms in humanitarian settings are often underfunded and poorly monitored, leaving private actors (e.g., aid distributors or local contractors) unregulated.

Strengthening accountability requires:

- Judicial reform with child-sensitive procedures.
- Survivor-centered case management.
- Transparency and reporting mechanisms accessible to children and communities.

Emerging Threats

Beyond wartime, several emerging threats are evident:

1. Famine and economic shocks exacerbate child labor.
2. Climate-related displacement continues to drive children into exploitative situations.
3. Digital exploitation risks are growing with limited cyber-literacy and online protection measures.

Multi-layered risks require integrated responses, combining child protection, education, health, and social services.

Tigray's post-war environment presents systemic and interrelated gaps:

- Weak legal enforcement and low prosecution rates.
- Inadequate and uneven child protection services.
- Underreporting and lack of reliable data.
- Fragmented multi-sectoral coordination.
- Weak cross-border protection mechanisms.
- Persistent impunity for perpetrators.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Tigray's children face interlinked vulnerabilities: post-war trauma, displacement, hunger, poverty, and digital exploitation.

The following measures are critical:

- Legal accountability and justice.
- Safe, dignified, and voluntary return of IDPs.
- Integrated health, psychosocial, and protection services.
- Cross-border cooperation and anti-trafficking measures.
- Community engagement and child participation.
- Standardized data collection and monitoring.
- Digital literacy and cyber-safety training for local administrations and parents.

- Development of a local cyber-crime unit and partnership with an international organization for technical support in this area.

We stand ready to collaborate for resilient child protection ecosystem, ensuring survivors not only recover but also thrive in safety and dignity in Tigray and beyond.

Women with Disabilities

RE: CRPD-Call for written submissions on the draft guidelines on addressing multiple and intersectional forms of discrimination against women and girls with disabilities

Methodology

This submission used three main methods: a desktop review, a questionnaire, and in-depth interviews.

Relevant publications were reviewed to provide background information and guide the development of the questionnaire and interview questions.

A total of 23 people responded to the survey.

- Gender: 16 respondents were male, 7 were female.
- Age: The largest group was 35–45 years (11 respondents), followed by 18–35 years (8 respondents), 2 were 45-55 years and 2 were over 55 years.
- Disability Status: Four respondents identified as living with a disability including two males and two females.
- Location: 18 respondents lived in Tigray, 2 within Ethiopia but outside Tigray and 3 outside Ethiopia

Among the respondents were a woman who counselled rape victims from Rwanda, Bosnia and other wars; and a front line service provider to rape victims. The questionnaire was administered using SurveyMars.

The Questionnaire was administered and responded to in Tigrigna in August 2025. Responses were translated into English and then analyzed. Particular attention was given to the experiences of people living with disabilities, by double checking their responses. Each response was summarized in addition to being reviewed in detail.

To gain deeper insights, interviews were conducted with:

- Genet Kidane Gebretsadik (Female), Executive Director of Women with Disabilities Development Association in Tigray, a CSO in Tigray working with women with disabilities. Interviewed on August 25, 2025
- Sister Mulu (Female) Coordinator of One Stop Center, Ayder Comprehensive Specialized Hospital and founder of Sister Mulu Charity a Charity serving vulnerable women and girls, in Mekelle, Tigray. Interviewed on August 26, 2025
- Goitom Haileselassie (Male), Leader at Tsilal Civil Society Western Tigray. Interviewed on August 26, 2025

These interviews focused on the challenges faced by women and girls with disabilities. Interviews were reviewed to highlight key issues, particularly those affecting women and girls with disabilities. Questions included but were not limited to issues of victims of Sexual and Reproductive Violence and IDPs. The overall questions related to women and girls living with disabilities. Willingness to have names and institutions disclosed as part of this submission was granted by the interviewees.

Although the sample size and composition should not be considered representative of the overall population, the study provides important insights into the lived experiences of Tigrayan women and girls and individuals with disabilities. The survey approach taken adhered to the highest ethical standards, obtaining the participants' free consent for participating in the research and maintaining their anonymity, except in the case where interviewees were leaders of civil society

organisations, who gave their formal consent to be identified by name and institution.

Introduction

1. With the highest household prevalence of disability in the country—30.1% compared to the national average of 20.5%, the Tigray region of Ethiopia exemplifies the urgent need to address intersectional discrimination experienced by women and girls with disabilities. Despite international and national commitments, translating international and national obligations into meaningful protections remains absent, particularly in war-affected Tigray.

The war in Tigray has intensified pre-existing inequalities while creating new, devastating vulnerabilities. Deliberate destruction of infrastructure, forced displacement, food blockades, and massive and systemic conflict related sexual and reproductive violence by Ethiopian and allied forces have disproportionately harmed women and girls with disabilities. These experiences compound barriers in essential areas. Women continue to face daily burdens even with physical limitations. As one respondent said, “Men who have physical disabilities are not expected to do so much, whereas women are still expected to clean, cook, wash, feed a family, etc. Women have monthly periods that make it difficult too. No appropriate help. If they have fistula, most likely they wet themselves and finding pads is hard.”[2]

Crucially, these compounded risks are not incidental; they reflect Ethiopia's systemic failures to implement its own legal protections, international human rights treaties, and humanitarian obligations.

Protective Regulations and Policies

2. Ethiopia's Proclamation No. 568/2008, the “Right to Employment of Persons with Disability Proclamation,” formally prohibits employment discrimination and mandates that employers provide reasonable

accommodation for persons with disabilities. In practice, the implementation of these protections is inconsistent, particularly in war-affected Tigray. The deliberate targeting of infrastructure during the war—including hospitals, schools, factories, and transportation systems—has disproportionately affected people with disabilities, depriving them of essential supports needed to participate fully in public life.

Women and girls with disabilities face compounded barriers to employment and economic participation. The destruction of workplaces and the collapse of local economies have severely limited opportunities, while deeply ingrained societal stigma frames disability as a “curse,” prompting families and communities to conceal or marginalize girls with disabilities instead of advocating for their inclusion. In Tigray, this cultural marginalization is exacerbated by the near-total breakdown of service delivery, resulting in a systematic denial of reasonable accommodations that the law guarantees. As one respondent observed, women and girls with disabilities are often placed in “unsafe workplaces, i.e., places that expose them to sexual assault, lack of responsibility, lack of self-determination, and vulnerability to sexual exploitation.”[3] These intersecting social, legal, and war-driven barriers highlight the urgent need for targeted enforcement and protective measures to ensure that disability rights are realized in practice.

3. Ethiopia’s Special Needs/Inclusive Education Strategy emphasizes inclusive education in principle, yet it falls short in addressing how disability intersects with other axes of marginalization, including gender, ethnicity, and displacement. In Tigray, this gap has particularly severe consequences, as girls with disabilities face layers of compounded discrimination that amplify their vulnerability in the context of war. The war, documented by independent observers as involving war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide, has created an environment in which ordinary protections for individuals with disabilities are impossible to realize.

These challenges are especially pronounced in education: schools have been destroyed, and learning materials are inaccessible, leaving girls with disabilities

effectively excluded from formal education. When disability intersects with poverty, displacement, and social stigma, the likelihood of receiving an education diminishes sharply. Families under extreme survival pressure may deprioritize the education of daughters with disabilities, who are frequently regarded as “burdens” rather than as individuals entitled to equal rights and opportunities.

Data Inclusiveness

4. The lack of disaggregated data on women and girls with disabilities in Ethiopia remains a critical barrier to effective policy development and accountability. National surveys and statistical instruments fail to capture the intersection of disability with other social determinants such as sex, ethnicity, and displacement. Although tools like the Washington Group Short Set—an internationally recognized method for identifying disability—exist, their integration into Ethiopia’s data systems has been inconsistent and partial, leaving significant gaps in understanding the experiences of marginalized populations.

The lack of nuanced data is particularly evident in the context of Tigray. A 2021 report by UNHCR documented 2.1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the region, yet it did not differentiate the data by disability or gender, effectively masking the distinct vulnerabilities faced by women and girls with disabilities. Similarly, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported 3.3 million IDPs across Ethiopia in 2024, noting that 69% were displaced due to conflict. Yet, the report did not consider the compounded barriers confronted by women with disabilities by failing to integrate data on disability.

- 4.1 Responses to the administered questionnaire underscore that data collection on women and girls with physical and psychological disabilities in Tigray is poor. 16 out of 23 respondents indicated that there has been no meaningful improvement in data collection efforts in recent years. Two respondents acknowledged minor progress, but emphasized that it remains insufficient, often overshadowed by

political challenges, resource limitations, and the practical difficulties of gathering information in a context where the rule of law is not consistently enforced.[4]

4.2 Some respondents highlighted that key organizations lack the institutional capacity to collect and manage comprehensive data.[5] Others admitted being unaware of any systematic data collection efforts. In certain cases, data is collected but fails to translate into tangible support or services, leaving the needs of disabled women and girls largely unmet.[6] Others pointed to the politicization of women's affairs and the lack of well-equipped, science-based institutions as additional barriers.[7]

4.3 The consequences of this data gap are profound. Respondents consistently emphasized that incomplete or outdated information leads to poorly matched interventions that do not address the real needs of women and girls with disabilities. A woman respondent who self-identified as living with disability described how the absence of reliable data prevents the development of high-quality services, compelling survivors to rely on traditional remedies such as holy water as the only available form of support.[8]

4.4 The absence of sex- and disability-sensitive data functions as a form of structural discrimination, as it renders invisible the specific needs of this population and hinders the creation of targeted interventions. Collectively, these failures represent a form of secondary victimization, compounding the harm experienced by survivors and delaying access to healing and recovery.

Groups at Risk:

5. The war in Tigray has exposed women and girls with disabilities to extraordinary risks, far surpassing those faced by other groups. Among these, four sub-groups demand particular attention: victims of sexual violence, internally displaced persons (IDPs) with disabilities, rural women with disabilities, and former combatants or survivors of war-related

injuries who now live with permanent impairments. Each group faces a unique constellation of vulnerabilities.

5.1 Women with severe physical disabilities, blindness, pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, and the elderly are especially vulnerable as humanitarian aid and medical services are inadequate.[9]

5.2 For women and girls with disabilities, the hazards are multiple. They confront sexual and reproductive violence which has been systematic and widespread in the war as they face additional physical and logistical barriers to fleeing violence, and encounter systemic obstacles when attempting to access humanitarian assistance or seek justice after the war. A respondent noted, “The mental scar of sexual violence at war is a lifetime scar that never heals...there is no appropriate counselling, no confidentiality; very likely people will know and hear your story and expose you to further attack and humiliation.”[10] Another highlighted the pervasive social stigma: “Those sexually assaulted by the Eritrean and Ethiopian armies are stigmatized by the community.”[11]

5.3 Displacement due to war and unconstitutional, forceful and violent occupation by Amhara and Eritrean forces exacerbates barriers to accessing services and protection. As Genet Kidane Gebretsadik from Women with Disabilities Development Association in Tigray said Gender Based Violence (GBV) is there in displacement camps.[12] Goitom Haileselassie of Tsilal Civil Society Western Tigray explained, “Gender Based Violence is usually there in forms of blackmailing raped women and shaming the husbands of women raped by occupying forces.” He added “One displaced woman from Western Tigray was raped by Eritrean soldiers and Fano militia. Her husband divorced her and married another because of this. She faces psychological trauma.” Goitom further notes: “There are no services for women and girls with disabilities in IDP camps. They are excluded from society...”[13]

5.4 Women and girls with disabilities in rural Tigray face additional isolation, limited access to healthcare, education, and social services. The deliberative destruction of infrastructure during the war and

restricted humanitarian supplies exacerbate these challenges. As one respondent to the questionnaire explained, “There are transportation challenges to come to urban centers,” Another respondent details, “Most of them outside the urban areas have not received assistance. The obstacles are financial and social exclusion.”[14] Rural women and girls with disabilities are frequently overlooked in emergency response and development programs, leaving them disproportionately vulnerable.

5.5 Members of the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) who acquired disabilities during the war experience a unique form of marginalization. Despite having served their communities, they are often treated as political actors rather than survivors, and consequently face homelessness, unemployment, and lack of medical and/or psychosocial support.[15] One respondent observed, “TDF members are very isolated as they are viewed as politicians, not fighting for their rights and their people.”[16] This intersection of disability, political perception, and marginalization further compounds vulnerability and limits access to essential services.

Main Risks:

6. Access to healthcare is severely limited and inconsistent

6.1 Psychological trauma remains a significant concern. Respondents indicated that ongoing exposure to violence, displacement, and social stigma has created pervasive mental health challenges among women and girls with disabilities. These challenges are compounded by the absence of accessible psychological counselling, medications, and community support systems.[17]

6.2 A respondent said key hospitals, including Ayder and Adigrat, report staff absenteeism, shortages of essential medications, and non-functioning equipment. Specialized services for women with disabilities, particularly those addressing mental health and trauma recovery, are largely unavailable, especially in rural areas.[18]

7. Sexual violence (CRSV) has disproportionately affected women and girls with disabilities.

- 7.1 Genet Kidane Gebretsadik, who leads the Women with Disabilities Development Association in Tigray, stated: “Women with disabilities have compounded pain and are not heard. Before the war, sexual violence usually happened in rural areas, and families often forced marriage. Now, these women are left in the streets.”[19]

- 7.2 Reports by Physician for human rights show multiple forms of CRSV, including gang rape, insertion of foreign and damaging objects into the uterus, and forced pregnancies.

- 7.3 The lack of privacy, protective measures, and trained personnel further undermines victims’ access to essential care and justice.[20]

8. Education for girls with disabilities has been deeply disrupted by the war.

- 8.1 Reports indicate that up to 96% of desks, 95% of blackboards, and 88% of classrooms were damaged or destroyed during the war. The use of schools as military bases during the war further limited safe access to education.

- 8.2 The lack of trained teachers, assistive learning materials, and inclusive policies severely restricts educational participation. A respondent noted, “The lack of special needs schools in the past has had its own impact on competitiveness and employment opportunities. Still, nothing is different.”[21]

- 8.3 Social stigma reinforces exclusion, with families often keeping girls at home due to fear of community judgment and economic hardship. In rural areas, social stereotypes and lack of awareness further marginalize girls with disabilities. One respondent remarked, “Due to social stigma, in rural areas, women and girls with disabilities are not sent to school.”[22] Respondents emphasized that this exclusion has long-term consequences on employability, social mobility, and empowerment.[23]

9. Economic insecurity is a defining feature of life for women and girls with disabilities in Tigray.

9.1 The deliberate destruction of schools, hospitals, factories, and agricultural resources, combined with widespread displacement, has led to unprecedented unemployment and poverty.[24] According to the Tigray Statistical Agency, unemployment quadrupled from 17% in 2019 to 74.1% in 2022, while poverty levels soared from 27% to 92% over the same period.

9.2 The collapse of local businesses disproportionately affect women with disabilities, who face additional barriers to workforce participation, including inaccessible transport, discriminatory hiring practices, and lack of disability-friendly workplaces.[25] Respondents described how economic deprivation impacts daily life of people living with disabilities. As one respondent notes: “It is difficult from recruitment to the lack of stairs, toilets, seats, traffic signs, or crossings conducive to people living with disabilities. Transport services are the biggest problem.”[26]

9.3 Others noted the absence of support for self-employment or entrepreneurial activities, leaving many women dependent on families. Economic exclusion reinforces social marginalization, limiting access to healthcare, education, and protective services.[27]

10. Housing and Humanitarian Assistance

10.1 Access to safe houses is extremely limited due to low societal understanding of disability and insufficient enforcement of protection laws. Genet Kidane Gebretsadik says: “Women with disabilities being admitted to the safe house are very slim not because the law allows it but simply because the understanding of disability is very low. Personally, we should make it clear that this is a human rights violation because ‘protection is right.’”[28]

10.2 Humanitarian assistance, psychological rehabilitation, and related training are often untimely and inequitable. Survivors experience war

trauma on multiple levels: physical, psychological, and economic. Sister Mulu explained: “Before the war, services, awareness campaigns, and health education were there. We would have handled the issue. However, during and after the war, over 50–60 women are admitted per month, including victims as young as 4 years old and as old as 93. There is no accountability, protection, or medical services available.”[29] It should be noted that many women don’t report sexual violence. Goitom Haileselassie added, “Community awareness programs existed before the war and there were severe judgments on those who committed sexual violence. However, post-war, violence has escalated, and resources are scarce. Conflict Related Sexual Violence has permeated households.”[30]

10.3 Institutional facilities frequently fail to meet accessibility standards, with inadequate infrastructure such as the absence of ramps, elevators, or disability-friendly toilets. Sister Mulu described the post-war context: “Social services were only available in urban centers. Post-war, these services have disappeared. Women with disabilities face multiple layers of impact, including lack of translators, destroyed infrastructure, no privacy for psychological treatment, and shortages of trained professionals and medication.”[31]

11. Women and girls with disabilities in Tigray experience compounded forms of discrimination.

11.1 Beyond physical barriers, they encounter social stigma that isolates them from education, healthcare, and social participation.[32]

11.2 Women with disabilities are at higher risk of sexual assault than men, underscoring the intersectionality of gender and disability in exposure to violence.[33]

11.3 Respondents emphasized that social pressures frequently silence survivors. As a respondent said: “They are typically told to keep quiet instead of seeking services.”[34] [35]

- 11.4 Family formation, marriage, and childbearing are further complicated for women with disabilities, often leading to social isolation and reduced life prospects.[36]
- 12. Stigma, weak legal protections, and lack of specialized services collectively create barriers to justice, protection, and psychological recovery.

Recommendations

- 13. This intersectional marginalization underscores the urgent need for policies and interventions that account for the full spectrum of vulnerabilities faced by women and girls with disabilities in Tigray.
 - 13.1 Ensure humanitarian interventions are accessible, prioritizing women and girls with disabilities in food distribution, cash transfers, and assistive devices.
 - 13.2 Hold perpetrators accountable and ensure survivors' rights, including: legal protection; safety; safe, voluntary, and dignified return of IDPs; and community awareness. Peace and justice must be central to rebuilding efforts.[37] Restitution for damages is also crucial.
 - 13.3 Include women with disabilities in humanitarian and CSO planning and budgeting, with MEAL systems tracking compliance of serving women and girls with disabilities.[38]
 - 13.4 Guarantee meaningful participation of women with disabilities in local councils, reconstruction committees, and DPO leadership positions. Provide leadership training and strengthen local DPOs with technical, financial, and advocacy support.
 - 13.5 Enforce Ethiopia's Proclamation No. 568/2008, complemented by local bylaws mandating inclusive hiring and disability-sensitive budgeting.

- 13.6 Establish specialized rehabilitation centres and community-based rehabilitation (CBR) for war-injured civilians and survivors of sexual and reproductive violence.
- 13.7 Provide mental health and psychosocial support, in addition to stigma reduction in IDP centres.[39]
- 13.8 Reintegrate girls with disabilities into education with accessible classrooms, assistive technologies, inclusive pedagogy, and flexible curricula.
- 13.9 Provide vocational training, start-up capital, market access, and microfinance targeting women with disabilities.[40]
- 13.10 Collaborate with local DPOs to map needs and design tailored interventions.[41] This calls for further research.

[1] GEMTigray is a movement for the social, economic, and political empowerment of women and girls in Tigray.

[2] Response to Questionnaire, A woman who counselled rape victims from Rwanda, Bosnia and other wars

[3] Response to Questionnaire, A woman who self identified as living with a disability

[4] Analysis of responses to questionnaire

[5] Response to Questionnaire

[6] Ibid

[7] Analysis of responses to questionnaire

- [8] Response to Questionnaire, A woman who self-identified as living with a disability
- [9] Response to Questionnaire, A woman who self-identified as living with a disability
- [10] Response to Questionnaire, A woman who counselled rape victims from Rwanda, Bosnia and other wars
- [11] Response to Questionnaire, A man who self-identified as living with a disability
- [12] Interview, Genet Kidane Gebretsadik
- [13] Interview, Goitom Haileselassie
- [14] Response to Questionnaire
- [15] Ibid
- [17] Ibid, Response to Questionnaire
- [18] Response to Questionnaire
- [19] Interview, Genet Kidane Gebretsadik
- [20] Responses to Questionnaire; Response to Questionnaire; Interview, Sister Mulu; Interview, Goitom Haileselassie; Response to Questionnaire
- [21] Response to Questionnaire
- [22] Response to Questionnaire
- [23] Response to Questionnaire
- [24] Responses to Questionnaire; Interview, Sister Mulu; Response to Questionnaire

- [25] Response to Questionnaire
- [26] Response to Questionnaire
- [27] Response to Questionnaire
- [28] Interview, Genet Kidane Gebretsadik
- [29] Interview, Sister Mulu
- [30] Interview, Goitom Haileselassie
- [31] Interview, Sister Mulu
- [32] Response to Questionnaire
- [33] Response to Questionnaire
- [34] Response to Questionnaire
- [35] Response to Questionnaire
- [36] Analysis of Responses to Questionnaire
- [37] Response to Questionnaire; Interview, Sister Mulu
- [38] Interview, Genet Kidane Gebretsadik
- [39] Ibid; Interview, Goitom Haileselassie
- [40] Interview, Genet Kidane Gebretsadik
- [41] Response to Questionnaire

Women and the Digital Age

Submission to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls

Response to Call for Inputs to the 2026 Thematic Report on Gender Equality, the Digital Space and the Age of Artificial Intelligence

Executive Summary:

This submission highlights the intersections between gender equality, digital technologies, and artificial intelligence (AI) from the perspective of the war-affected Tigray region in northern Ethiopia. Women and girls in Tigray face layered barriers to digital access and participation—arising from war, displacement, poverty, and systemic exclusion—while new technologies increasingly shape political, economic, and social life.

Digital tools offer opportunities for empowerment, education, and entrepreneurship, yet also expose women and girls to severe online harassment, disinformation, and algorithmic bias. The post-war digital divide in Tigray is widening, as damaged infrastructure and weak policy frameworks leave most women outside the digital and AI ecosystems.

This paper synthesises GEMTigray's experiences engaging with UN mechanisms on gender and technology; analyses positive and negative digital impacts on women and girls; outlines data and policy gaps; and proposes actions to ensure AI and digital transformation advance, rather than endanger, gender equality.

We urge the OHCHR to include conflict-affected contexts such as Tigray in its thematic work and to promote global standards ensuring gender-responsive, inclusive, and accountable AI governance. Without urgent investment in digital literacy, safety, and participation, women and girls in Tigray risk being permanently excluded from the benefits of the digital age.

Engagement with UN and Human Rights Mechanisms

GEMTigray has consistently engaged with OHCHR and other treaty bodies to amplify the voices of women and girls in Tigray.

- We contributed to the OHCHR Guidelines on Child, Early and Forced Marriage, highlighting the vulnerability of girls during the Tigray conflict.
- We submitted inputs to CEDAW's Addendum to General Recommendation No. 30 (Women, Peace and Security), emphasising accountability for conflict-related sexual violence.
- We engaged with the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) on intersectional discrimination against women and girls with disabilities.

These engagements have enhanced visibility of Tigrayan women's experiences in UN processes.

Opportunities for women in the Digital Environment

Despite challenges, the digital environment presents transformative possibilities:

a. Expression and Association

Social media and messaging platforms have provided women activists and survivors with new spaces to document abuses and mobilise solidarity.

b. Education and Skills

Online courses and learning hubs allow displaced or isolated women to access information once unreachable.

c. Economic Participation

Digital entrepreneurship, online marketing, and remote work create alternative livelihoods in a fragile post-conflict economy. Women's cooperatives use basic mobile banking and messaging apps to maintain income channels amid instability.

These show that technology can serve as a recovery tool—if access, literacy, and safety are addressed.

Threats and Harms to women in Digital and AI Contexts

While digital tools offer opportunity, they also amplify inequality and exposure to violence.

a. Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV)

Women journalists, activists, and human-rights defenders face coordinated online harassment, defamation, and threats aimed at silencing dissent. Non-consensual sharing of intimate images and AI-generated deepfakes compound trauma and reputational damage, especially in conservative communities.

b. Disinformation and AI-Driven Abuse

AI-generated propaganda and deepfake content have been used to vilify Tigrayan women, blurring truth and fostering hate. These manipulations can reinforce gender stereotypes, obstruct justice, and retraumatise survivors.

c. Digital Exclusion

War-damaged infrastructure, lack of electricity, and unaffordable connectivity leave most women without digital access. The resulting “AI divide” threatens to entrench economic marginalisation.

Women's Participation in Technology and AI

In Tigray and much of Ethiopia, women's representation in technology remains minimal. Barriers include:

- Educational Gaps: Years of school closures and displacement have deprived girls of STEM learning.
- Economic Limitations: Poverty restricts access to devices and training.
- Social Norms: Patriarchal expectations limit women's career choices in science and technology.
- Political Exclusion: AI policy discussions are dominated by central authorities and male elites, with little input from marginalised regions.

War, AI, and Gendered Impacts

The war in Tigray illustrates how technology, including AI-enabled systems, can exacerbate human-rights risks.

Reports suggest the use of drones and surveillance technologies capable of automated targeting. While data on AI integration remain scarce, such tools raise grave concerns about civilian protection, transparency, and accountability.

Women and girls have faced disproportionate impacts—sexual violence, displacement, and trauma—while lacking digital channels for protection or documentation. The militarisation of technology underscores the urgency of regulating AI in conflict and humanitarian settings.

Environmental Socio-Cultural Dimensions and Gender

The environmental footprint of AI—especially energy-intensive data processing—can aggravate local resource scarcity. In Tigray, where women already bear responsibility for water and energy collection, such indirect effects heighten gendered burdens.

Culturally, AI-driven media often reproduces narrow gender stereotypes, portraying women in domestic or sexualised roles. Without local data or inclusive design, these systems risk erasing Tigrayan women's diverse identities and heritage. Conversely, AI can also preserve languages like Tigrigna if deployed ethically and inclusively.

Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence: Key Findings

TFGBV has become a defining digital rights issue:

- Platforms enable harassment, stalking, and manipulation through AI-generated images and voice alterations.
- During connectivity blackouts, survivors lost access to reporting channels and online support.
- Many women fear using social media due to potential targeting by hate groups or security forces.

Legal and psychosocial frameworks in Ethiopia remain largely offline-oriented, offering little recourse for digital harms. A comprehensive response requires coordinated prevention, safe reporting systems, survivor-centred support, and law-enforcement training on digital evidence.

Data Gaps and Accountability Deficits

Evidence on the digital experiences of women and girls in Tigray is profoundly limited. Key data gaps include:

1. Lack of sex-, age-, and disability-disaggregated data on digital access, literacy, and harm.
2. Absence of systematic data on AI deployments (e.g., surveillance analytics or facial recognition).
3. Minimal tracking of technology-facilitated GBV in humanitarian or displacement settings.
4. Scarcity of qualitative data on cultural norms and women's digital agency.

These gaps obstruct effective policymaking and enable impunity. Data collection must prioritise ethical standards—consent, confidentiality, and community ownership.

Legal and Policy Landscape in Ethiopia

Ethiopia has National AI Policy (2024) but lacks explicit gender provisions. Existing digital strategies and data-protection laws are silent on discrimination, bias, and AI-related violence.

Gaps:

- No legal safeguards against algorithmic bias or AI-facilitated abuse.
- Weak enforcement of data-protection and cybercrime laws.
- Limited participation of women's organisations in policymaking.

Recommendations:

1. Integrate gender-impact assessments into AI policy and procurement.
2. Establish complaint mechanisms for AI-related rights violations.
3. Ensure transparency in algorithmic decision-making used in public administration.

4. Fund women-led digital rights initiatives and inclusive innovation programmes.

Rights Implications of AI and Data Misuse

AI systems can both illuminate and obscure gendered realities. Without safeguards, they risk violating multiple rights:

- **Privacy:** Surveillance, data scraping, and predictive analytics can expose survivors or activists.
- **Security:** Digital tracking of women's movements or communications may facilitate abuse.
- **Access to Services:** Automated humanitarian aid allocation without gender-sensitive parameters risks exclusion.
- **Justice:** Absence of digital evidence collection impedes accountability for online and wartime crimes.
- **Economic Rights:** Without data on women's access to digital markets, inequality remains hidden.

Addressing these issues requires transparent governance, robust data-protection frameworks, and rights-based AI deployment.

Emerging Good Practices

While examples remain limited, promising models exist:

- GSMA's Mobile Gender Gap indicators can be applied to conflict-affected contexts to monitor women's connectivity.

- UN Women’s Gender Data Outlook offers practical guidance for integrating sex-disaggregated digital metrics.
- Anonymised AI tools for detecting online GBV signals—if used with consent—can support early response systems.
- Regional cooperation among African digital-rights groups can harmonise standards and share resources for women’s protection online.

These models should be localised for Tigray through partnerships among civil society, academia, and humanitarian actors.

Recommendations

a. National Level

1. Embed gender equality into Ethiopia’s AI and digital-transformation policies.
2. Establish a national framework for preventing technology-facilitated gender-based violence.
3. Ensure that all government and private-sector AI systems undergo human-rights and bias impact assessments.
4. Expand connectivity and provide affordable devices for women, particularly in rural and post-conflict zones.
5. Integrate digital and AI literacy into school curricula and community learning programmes for women and girls.

b. Regional (Tigray) Level

1. Rehabilitate digital infrastructure destroyed during conflict with a gender-responsive lens.
2. Support women-led digital innovation hubs and mentorship networks.

3. Create a regional monitoring body to review new technologies for fairness and inclusivity.
4. Develop low-connectivity solutions—SMS or voice-based platforms—for maternal health, legal aid, and psychosocial support.

c. International Level

1. Global tech companies must apply equal safety and transparency standards in Ethiopia as in developed markets.
2. OHCHR and donors should prioritise funding for digital-rights research, survivor protection, and gender-inclusive AI governance.
3. Include women from conflict-affected areas in global AI policy dialogues and ethics frameworks.

Conclusion

The digital age holds enormous promise for women and girls—but also peril when inequality, conflict, and bias converge. In Tigray, years of war have left women disconnected from the tools that could transform their lives. Meanwhile, AI and digital systems developed without their voices risk deepening exclusion.

For the digital space to become a domain of empowerment, not control, gender equality must be embedded at every stage: access, design, governance, and accountability. The OHCHR's leadership is critical in ensuring that global standards for AI and digital transformation uphold women's rights everywhere, including in conflict-affected regions.

We stand ready to collaborate with the UN and partners to build a safer, fairer digital future for all women and girls in Tigray and beyond.

Women and Peace

Input for HRC report 2026 Peace and international solidarity

Submission by GEM Tigray (Gender Empowerment Movement Tigray), A Movement for the Social, Economic, and Political Empowerment of Women and Girls in Tigray

Peace Education and the Culture of Non-Violence

Ethiopia has developed formal commitments to promoting a culture of peace through education, gender equality, and dialogue. However, the implementation of these principles has been severely undermined by war, deliberate attacks on education according to the Commission of Inquiry on Tigray Genocide, and widespread human-rights violations leading up to genocide according to the New Lines Institute, particularly in the Tigray region. While government and international partners have introduced peace-education frameworks and programs, the devastation caused by genocidal war, as outlined above, has left a profound gap between policy and practice.

National education strategies formally endorse peace education and related goals such as non-violence, human rights, and gender equality. Institutions including the Ministry of Education and Ethiopian universities have worked with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to develop peace-education curricula and teacher-training modules. Examples include UNESCO's Peacebuilding Training for Ethiopia, and the British Council and

UNESCO University Peace Education Handbook. These frameworks emphasize tolerance, empathy, inter-faith dialogue, and equality as core national values.

Humanitarian and international programs have also played a critical role. Major partners such as the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), Education Cannot Wait, Plan International, and the European Union have worked to restore access to schooling, teacher training, and psychosocial support in a context of devastation. UNICEF has reported investments in Tigray education programs designed to “sow the seeds of peace and prosperity.” Similarly, European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) and Plan International have focused on helping children remain in school.

In areas where peace education is implemented—through universities, NGOs, or psychosocial support within schools—key themes include non-violence and conflict-resolution skills; respect for diversity and human rights; inter-cultural and inter-faith dialogue; and gender sensitivity that promotes girls’ access to education. These initiatives follow UNESCO frameworks and national gender strategies that position peace education as a foundation for social cohesion.

However, the genocidal war, as mentioned above, in Tigray gravely contradicts these initiatives. The Commission of Inquiry on Tigray Genocide has documented deliberate and massive attacks on education. Such destruction has rendered education an unreliable vehicle for peacebuilding in affected communities.

Even prior to the war, Ethiopia faced systemic challenges: inconsistent teacher training, limited financing, and patriarchal norms that restricted gender equality. After ceasefire, these challenges have deepened due to political tensions and restricted humanitarian access.

Despite these barriers, local peacebuilding initiatives offer hope. Community reconciliation projects, youth peacebuilding networks, NGO-supported psychosocial programs, and inter-faith dialogues in Tigray all demonstrate the potential for peace education to grow from the ground up. For example, Pact’s community peacebuilding programs in Tigray, illustrate that when education

connects to community healing, economic recovery, and accountability, peace can begin to take hold.

Women's Engagement in Peacebuilding and Protection

Ethiopia has subscribed to the global Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda under United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. UN Women's country program highlights ongoing efforts to strengthen women's participation in peace processes. Progress toward the National Action Plan on WPS can be reviewed at https://open.unwomen.org/en/outcome-detail/XM-DAC-41146-ETH_D_1.2.

International and local partners have also implemented programs focused on women's leadership, gender-based violence (GBV) response, and psychosocial support. Multi-Partner Trust Fund initiatives have supported women's associations, trained community leaders, and promoted inclusion of women in peace and recovery planning.

Yet, the reality of the genocidal war in Tigray, as mentioned above, has revealed a catastrophic gap between commitment and protection. Investigations by Amnesty International, the Associated Press, and Physicians for Human Rights reported by The Guardian, Commission of Inquiry on Tigray Genocide all documented systematic sexual and gender-based violence against Tigrayan women and girls by Ethiopian, Eritrean, and allied forces. These abuses constitute crimes against humanity and, in some analyses (New Lines Institute and Commission of Inquiry on Tigray Genocide) acts of genocide.

Further, while policies promote women's participation, women were largely excluded from the 2022 Cessation of Hostilities Agreement and the subsequent Nairobi Declaration. Survivor services are underfunded, and many affected areas remain inaccessible. Bridging this gap requires scaling survivor-centred services, finalizing an inclusive WPS National and Local (Tigray level) Action Plans, and ensuring impartial investigations with credible pathways for prosecution and reparations.

Civil Society's Role in Promoting Peace

Civil society in Ethiopia—particularly in Tigray—operates in highly constrained conditions. Organizations balance humanitarian relief, human-rights documentation, and peacebuilding amid ongoing insecurity. Applying Johan Galtung's framework, most civil-society organizations (CSOs) focus on “negative peace” (reducing direct violence through humanitarian protection) while a smaller segment works toward “positive peace” (addressing inequality, justice, and social reform).

Humanitarian focus is a necessity. As detailed in Humanitarian Outcomes' Tigray Access Report, insecurity, displacement, and blocked corridors have forced NGOs to prioritize relief and safety. These conditions, including attacks on aid workers (including MSF), make long-term peacebuilding nearly impossible.

Nevertheless, local and international actors continue advancing positive-peace initiatives. Pact's reconciliation projects and the Rift Valley Institute's research on CSOs and peacebuilding illustrate ongoing efforts to link justice, reconciliation, and institutional reform. Women-led movements, including GEM Tigray and survivor-led networks, emphasize gender equality and justice as cornerstones of durable peace.

In practice, both negative and positive peace efforts are essential. Immediate humanitarian action ensures survival, while justice-oriented programs lay the groundwork for long-term stability. Without positive peace, stability is fragile. Donor flexibility is critical: funding must enable CSOs, movements, and networks to include beyond relief and incorporate governance, reconciliation, and rights-based programming.

Cultural Violence and Shrinking Civic Space

Civil-society organizations and activists advocating for peace in Tigray have faced cultural violence, including hate speech, online harassment, and delegitimization. Immediately prior to, during and after the war, numerous investigations recorded widespread online incitement against Tigrayans and those showing solidarity. Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) reporting and Amnesty International's analysis of online hate and social media platform failures both highlight the role of social media in amplifying division.

Organizations calling for accountability or humanitarian access have been labeled “terrorist sympathizers” or “anti-national.” Such stigmatization, coupled with state restrictions, has eroded public trust and made peace activism dangerous. Human Rights Watch's report details suspensions, closures, and arrests of human-rights defenders.

These dynamics lead to self-censorship, reduced field activity, and personal risk. The combination of legal harassment and cultural hostility has created a high-risk environment that limits civic engagement and accountability.

To counter this, UN and donor partners should strengthen protections for CSOs through human rights protections, legal reform, safety training, psychosocial support for staff, and robust moderation of online hate speech in local languages.

Women's Inclusion and Structural Violence

Women-led organizations in Tigray remain the backbone of peace and recovery. According to UN Women's civil-society mapping women's groups provide frontline services addressing gender-based violence, psychosocial care, and leadership training. The Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund has provided direct grants to strengthen these organizations.

Documentation by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Physicians for Human Rights and the Organization for Justice and Accountability in the Horn of Africa underscores the importance of civil society in documenting atrocities and

advocating for survivors. Yet the magnitude of the crisis far exceeds local capacity. Vast number of women remain without care, while insecurity and political obstruction prevent access to affected areas.

Deliberate aid obstruction, as documented by Human Rights Watch, has further limited service delivery. Funding shortfalls and donor fatigue have worsened the problem, as noted by The Guardian. Stigma, disability exclusion, and fear of reprisal continue to silence many survivors, a pattern analyzed by Equality Now's shadow report.

Justice and accountability mechanisms remain absent. The 2024 U.S. Department of State Country Report on Ethiopia both find ongoing impunity for ethnic cleansing, war crimes and sexual violence. Without credible investigations and reparations, structural violence remains entrenched.

To strengthen inclusion, donors and UN agencies should expand direct funding to local women-led organizations, movements, and networks to ensure humanitarian access, and invest in survivor-centred justice processes including forensic documentation and legal aid. Programming must reach women with disabilities, child survivors, and those in rural or forcefully and unconstitutionally occupied areas.

Conclusion

Ethiopia's policies formally align with peace education, women's engagement, and civil-society inclusion. However, the experience of Tigray reveals a profound contradiction between these commitments and lived reality. Genocidal war, massive and systematic sexual violence, and repression have destroyed the social foundations necessary for peace.

Civil-society organizations—especially women-led groups—continue to shoulder immense responsibilities under grave risk. To fulfill Ethiopia's commitments under international human-rights and peace frameworks, urgent action is required:

- Ensure justice and accountability through international impartial investigations and prosecutions, including pathways through International Court of Justice
- Rebuild education systems in general but also those that foster tolerance and empathy.
- Guarantee survivor-centred services with sustainable funding to local women's organizations, movements, and networks.
- Restore civic space and protect peace activists from cultural and legal violence.
- Include women's voices at every stage of peace and recovery.

Only by bridging the gap between policy and practice—through accountability, justice, and inclusion—can Ethiopia build a genuine and lasting culture of peace. Until then, it will face unending cycle of violence.

Policy Brief: CEDAW's New Addendum Must Confront the Full Machinery of Modern Atrocity

As the world confronts the most intense wave of armed conflicts, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) has offered a [new Addendum to General Recommendation No. 30](#)—an expansive and deeply needed document attempting to update the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda for the 21st century. The [Addendum, now in its advance unedited form](#), recognises the evolving terrain of violence: the rise of AI-enabled warfare, shrinking civic space for women, digital gender-based harms, and the metastasizing use of starvation, sexual violence, and displacement as tools of war .

But if this Addendum is to become an impactful standard it aspires to be, it must confront realities that remain conspicuously absent from the text: the political durability of perpetrator regimes, the non-sexualised economic and cultural devastation inflicted on women, the algorithmic grooming of children into violence, the need for survivor-centred justice that is more than aspirational, and the accountability gap left by the limits of the International Criminal Court's jurisdiction.

These are not theoretical concerns. They are lived realities—all over the world but also in Tigray, Ethiopia, where the genocide from 2020 onward revealed the full architecture of modern atrocity.

Regimes That Commit Atrocity Crimes Still Govern—and the Addendum Must Say So

[Article 3 of the Addendum](#) outlines States' obligations under humanitarian and human rights law, yet it does **not directly address one of the most troubling characteristics of contemporary wars: regimes that commit atrocity crimes often remain in power.**

Governments implicated in atrocity crimes frequently obstruct accountability while consolidating power. Further, entrenched political elites weaponize state institutions to prolong impunity.

The Ethiopian and Eritrean governments—as documented by Amnesty International, the UN Special Rapporteurs, and Human Rights Watch of widespread atrocities including starvation, mass killings, conflict-related sexual violence and ethnic cleansing—remain fully functioning members of the international community.

The Addendum must explicitly name this reality. Without this acknowledgement, prevention becomes impossible.

Beyond Sexual Violence: War Destroys Women's Entire Worlds

The [Addendum](#) rightly expands the definition of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) but does not yet fully capture the economic destruction, cultural erasure, and social collapse that shape women's lives during war.

As the Addendum itself recognises, wars today include physical, moral, psychological and transgenerational harms. Yet the global policy framework largely reduces women's wartime suffering to sexual violence alone.

The record from wars around the world—including Tigray, Sudan, Yemen, Myanmar, , and Afghanistan—shows a more expansive picture:

- **Economic annihilation:** Women lose land, markets, livestock, savings, and income. Women suffer disproportionately from the destruction of local economies during war.
- **Cultural genocide:** [According to the Mekelle University Cultural Heritage Institute](#), at least 200 religious or cultural sites were documented as physically damaged or targeted in Tigray. [UNESCO warns](#) that destruction of cultural heritage is often used as a weapon against identity and belonging.

- **Long-term health collapse:** Women experience chronic pain, disability, malnutrition, and untreated injuries that last decades beyond wars.

The Addendum must move from implication to affirmation: **war's harm to women is structural, multidimensional, and intentionally inflicted.**

Digital Grooming: The New Pipeline into Gendered Violence

[Article 5](#) rightly warns that children accessing adult-owned electronic devices are exposed to algorithmically amplified adult content. But the [Addendum](#) must go further: social media platforms today serve as **automated grooming systems**, shaping attitudes toward gender and normalising sexualised violence.

The Wall Street Journal's 2021 investigation into Instagram [found that](#) recommendation systems funnel minors toward sexualised content and self-harm.

This is not peripheral to conflict. It is central. Gender-based violence is increasingly algorithmic, and the Addendum must frame digital harms as a core WPS issue.

Voluntary, Safe, and Dignified Returns: The Principle that Cannot Be Compromised

[Article 9's reference to "integration or resettlement"](#) of displaced populations risks being utilized by states that wish to prematurely close displacement files for political optics. The Addendum must explicitly state that return must be safe, dignified, and voluntary.

In Tigray, hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons remain in camps because returns would expose them to continued violence. This reality must be reflected in global norms.

Witness Protection Requires More Than Aspiration

[Article 10 emphasises](#) comprehensive witness protection schemes, but concrete examples are essential. The **ICC's Victims and Witnesses Unit**, the **Special Court for Sierra Leone**, and Colombia's **Unidad Nacional de Protección** offer proven models for relocation, anonymity, trauma-informed interviewing, encrypted evidence storage, and long-term psychosocial support.

The Addendum must direct states to adopt comparable formal systems, not voluntary “good practices.”

Religious Leaders Must Be Recognised as Key Justice Actors

[Article 12 recognises](#) the role of journalists, grassroots groups, and women human rights defenders—but omits religious leaders, whose influence in many societies—including Tigray—is decisive.

[The UN’s own report](#) on community-led responses to CRSV acknowledges the centrality of religious leaders in shaping cultural norms.

Their exclusion from the Addendum is a substantive omission.

The True Cost of Conflict-Related Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

[Article 17 correctly affirms](#) that sexual violence can never be justified, but the Addendum must confront the enormous medical, financial, and psychological costs survivors bear. Women suffering from fistula, uterine damage, fractures, burns, and disabling injuries require years of care and massive expenses.

Resources for these interventions must be explicitly mandated—not recommended—within the Addendum.

Justice Must Reach Beyond the ICC

[Articles 21, 26, 49, 51, 54, 73, 75, 87 and 112 refer](#) to accountability, but the ICC’s jurisdictional limits mean many of the world’s gravest crimes—including those in Ethiopia—are outside its reach. Universal jurisdiction, hybrid courts, and UN investigative mandates must be explicitly named as alternatives.

[Germany’s landmark Koblenz trial](#), which prosecuted Syrian officials through universal jurisdiction, proves this is both possible and effective.

The Addendum must recognise and encourage such mechanisms.

The Data Crisis: When Lack of Information Becomes a Tool of Oppression

[Articles 14 and 28](#) address missing disaggregated data, but the Addendum must acknowledge that **the absence of data is often intentional**. In Tigray, authorities systematically blocked famine assessments, death registries, displacement surveys, and SGBV documentation.

[Denial of data is a tactic that obscures humanitarian need and enables atrocity](#). Thus, data disaggregation is not a technical exercise—it is a political safeguard.

Women's Health Cannot Be Confined to Motherhood

[Article 30's](#) language risks reinforcing a long-standing bias: when women's health is recognised, it is predominantly through their role as mothers. Reproductive health is essential, but so are chronic illness, psychological trauma, disability, menopause, and long-term rehabilitation.

Women's health extends far beyond reproductive roles and includes lifelong rights to comprehensive care.

The Addendum must reflect this universality.

Mine Action and Male Dominance: The Structural Barrier

[Article 42](#) highlights inclusive mine action but does not address entrenched male dominance in this field. Women need institutional mechanisms—scholarships, recruitment pipelines, leadership quotas—to participate equally. [Studies have already shown](#) that women's participation increases safety, community trust, and clearance accuracy.

These findings must be reflected in the Addendum.

Trauma-Sensitive Pedagogy: A Global Educational Imperative

[Article 49 rightly emphasises](#) trauma-informed education, yet most conflict-affected schools lack even basic psychosocial services. The Addendum must treat trauma pedagogy as essential infrastructure, not supplemental care.

Economic Reparations and the Centrality of Grassroots Women's Movements

[Articles 55, 67, 79, and 120](#) touch on economic impacts and funding, but the Addendum must go further. Reconstruction funds must reach **local women's organizations**, especially in conflict-affected areas. “Across all development contexts, WOs receive only 0.3 per cent of total bilateral allocable ODA and 1 per cent of all gender-related aid,” [according to UN Women's 2024 Report](#).

Economic recovery is not secondary; it is foundational to justice.

Pandemic Preparedness as a Security Obligation

[Article 69](#) should recognise that pandemics exacerbate gendered vulnerability during conflict—and that states have a legal and moral duty to prevent, detect, and respond to outbreaks. This became painfully clear during COVID-19, when [UN report](#) showed skyrocketing domestic violence, maternal mortality, and food insecurity.

Pandemic preparedness must be a WPS obligation.

A Global Framework Fit for a New Century

The Addendum to CEDAW's GR 30 is a defining document for a world in crisis. But for it to rise to the scale of today's challenges, it must fully acknowledge the political, economic, cultural, digital, and structural dimensions of gendered harm.

Women do not experience war in fragments. Our global frameworks must stop responding to it in fragments.

The Addendum must name impunity. It must address algorithmic violence. It must centre grassroots women. It must fund long-term healing. It must demand justice beyond the ICC. It must treat data as life-saving infrastructure. And it must

recognise that war's damage to women extends far beyond sexual violence—into the economic, cultural, digital, and intergenerational fabric of communities.

If the Addendum embraces this fuller vision, it will not merely update GR 30. It will redefine the future of women's rights in conflict contexts.