

Policy Brief:

Addressing Women's Protection Challenges in Liben and Ambassel Woredas, Ethiopia



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Purpose

This brief presents research that has been led by co-researchers¹ – women with lived experiences of protracted humanitarian crises in Liben and Ambassel Woredas (districts). These co-researchers guided every stage of the process, from setting the agenda to shaping the findings and driving the recommendations. They are also at the forefront of disseminating the findings, and following the progress in the implementation of the recommendations set out herein. They are from Beza and SGDA, organisations that are women led and working in Ambassel (Amhara Region) and Liben (Oromia Region), respectively.

The tools used to collect data were participatory and designed to prompt reflection through visual and experiential methods – such as the power walk exercise, which helped illuminate differences in access and opportunity within communities by making inequalities visible in real time.

The aim of this brief is to inform Ethiopian government bodies, donors, International non-government organisation (INGOs), Non-government organisations (NGOs), civil society organisations, and UN agencies – particularly through the National Protection Cluster and the Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility (GBV AoR) – about the current situation regarding women's issues in Ambassel and Liben, their proposed solutions, and the need for concrete action. It outlines lived experiences, systemic gaps, and actionable recommendations to improve women's protection in the neglected crisis affecting the two regions.

Executive Summary

According to our research findings, women in Liben and Ambassel woredas face complex, overlapping challenges to their protection, safety, dignity and well-being. These challenges are rooted in security instability, social exclusion, environmental degradation, entrenched gender inequality – and have been further exacerbated by the recent conflict and drought. In Liben co-researchers documented how prolonged droughts, deforestation, and effects of climate change have intensified women's vulnerability by increasing the burden of daily survival tasks and exposing them to heightened risks of gender-based violence (GBV). The research also shows that security instability and conflict in both areas have weakened traditional support systems and law enforcement structures, leaving women with limited access to justice and protection. Displacement – driven by environmental stress and violence – further isolates women, undermining their economic independence and severing community ties.

Despite these difficulties, our findings have found that women have remarkable resilience through informal support networks, economic initiatives, and peacebuilding efforts. To effectively address the root causes of women's protection issues, a comprehensive, gender-sensitive approach – with women at the forefront and at the centre – and reforms targeting structural inequalities are urgently needed.

As such, this policy report unpacks the root causes of women's protection issues across the two Woredas, and women's coping strategies to overcome these, before moving into key recommendations.

Root Causes of Women's Protection Issues

The root causes of women's protection risks in Liben and Ambassel include climate change, displacement, and conflict. These overlapping drivers of vulnerability undermine women's safety, autonomy, and access to essential services. The following section explains these factors in more detail, drawing directly from the research findings and voices of co-researchers.

In Liben woreda, environmental pressures are a primary driver of women's vulnerabilities. Prolonged droughts, accelerated by climate change, deforestation, and resource depletion, force women to travel long distances to collect water and food, increasing their exposure to violence. As one woman put it, *"Drought forces us to walk longer distances for water, leaving us less time for work or education, and putting us at risk of violence."* These environmental shocks have destabilised livelihoods, even among families not previously considered poor.

At the same time, conflict and security instability have eroded traditional social bonds and governance structures. This has left women without access to legal protection or recourse when harmed. One of the co-researchers of this report described the devastation: *"During war we lose everything – our homes, our families and our safety."* Another woman shared, *"here's no security, no work, and no way to provide for my children."*

In addition, displacement – whether due to climate or conflict, or both – has a particularly harsh impact. Our research has found that, women who are uprooted from their community lose both economic independence and social support systems, making them more susceptible

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to abuse and marginalisation. For women facing intersecting vulnerabilities – such as those who are elderly, disabled, or members of ethnic or religious minorities – their challenges are compounded. *"We need long-term solutions – like better access to water, safe spaces, and a peaceful life,"* one co-researcher urged.

In Ambassel woreda, ongoing conflict has collapsed social and legal protection systems, leaving women under constant threat of violence and impunity, as documented in the research. A 36-year-old co-researcher shared, *"I wish I could get justice and find a job so I could work and support my family"*, after being forcibly evicted from her home by her husband, who was released from custody within three months. Legal systems are often inaccessible or biased, while fear of retaliation discourages survivors from speaking out.

Mental health distress and psychosocial trauma are pervasive among women and girls in Ambassel, fuelled by chronic insecurity and exposure to violence. However, support services remain largely unavailable, and stigma deters many from seeking help. Economic instability

further exacerbates vulnerability. As one co-researcher said, *"We are in an economic crisis; life has become difficult due to the security situation. We can no longer work with the little money we used to earn."* Conflict-induced resource shortages have decimated access to food, healthcare, and income-generating opportunities.

Our research found that resource shortages during conflicts and droughts severely limit healthcare delivery, leaving women and children to suffer from inadequate medical care. This leads to preventable health issues and contributes to high maternal and child mortality rates. Pregnant women are among the most vulnerable groups, facing significant challenges in accessing adequate healthcare—especially in remote or conflict-affected areas.

The intersectionality of women's identities – including age, disability, marital status, and displacement – intensifies their exclusion. For example, *"Elderly women or women with disabilities struggle more during droughts or displacement due to mobility issues or lack of support,"* explained one co-researcher. These compounding challenges restrict access to vital services like healthcare, education, justice, and protection.

Together, these insights illustrate that women's protection issues in neglected crises stem not from a single factor, but from the intersection of environmental collapse, violent conflict, broken justice systems, gender-based discrimination, and economic hardship. Women leaders across both woredas call for sustainable, gender-sensitive interventions that include restoring access to water and land, improving legal protections, expanding mental health services, supporting economic empowerment, and ensuring that marginalised women are directly involved in decision-making processes.

Women's Coping Strategies

Despite the significant challenges, our research found that women in these regions have developed various coping mechanisms demonstrating resilience and agency. Many women form informal support networks and cooperatives, sharing resources and providing emotional support to one another. Small-scale trading, sustainable farming, and livestock rearing are common income-generating activities that help maintain some level of economic independence.

Psychosocial coping is also critical. Women draw strength from cultural practices, spiritual beliefs, and the limited support offered by NGOs, although stigma and systemic inequalities often undermine access to formal services. Many women actively participate in peacebuilding and community dialogues, advocating for systemic change despite the risks involved. However, the lack of effective institutional response and fear of retaliation continue to silence many survivors.

Insights from Women on Ensuring an Intersectional Protection

The Power Walk exercise² offered women a space to reflect deeply on the intersecting inequalities – such as gender, poverty, disability, and systemic exclusion that shape their daily realities. By embodying diverse roles, co-researchers developed empathy and sharpened their understanding of how power imbalances impact access to basic rights and services. Many women voiced frustration at being forgotten by systems and leaders, with one stating, *"I feel powerless when I can't provide food or water to my family."*

Others highlighted the compounded impact of gender-based violence, lack of decision-making power and structural neglect.

Yet, the exercise also surfaced sources of strength. Women found power in solidarity and collective action, *“I feel powerful when I come together with other women to solve problems,”* one co-researcher shared. They underscored the need for tailored services for the most vulnerable, including mobile clinics, accessible schools, and targeted humanitarian aid. Community-based networks were seen as essential for sharing resources, advocating for inclusion, and building emotional resilience.

Women leaders stressed that lasting change requires not only inclusive services but also a shift in how power is understood and addressed. As one woman observed, *“If we ignore power, nothing changes. Women stay poor, uneducated, and unsafe”*. Education, skills training and safe spaces free from violence and discrimination were identified as critical to building agency. Listening to and meaningfully involving marginalised women in policy and program design is key to transforming systems that have long left them behind.

Conclusion

The intertwined crises of climate-induced disasters, conflict, displacement, and social exclusion deepen the vulnerabilities of women to violence, poverty, and marginalisation. Yet, women in areas afflicted by protracted and neglected crises are not passive victims – they are active agents of change, advocates, and leaders within their communities. Effective, lasting progress demands that policies and programs move beyond short-term relief to address the

structural causes of inequality, prioritise women's safety and empowerment, and place their leadership at the centre of humanitarian action and peacebuilding efforts. Only through sustained, coordinated action that listens to and invests in women can these communities achieve justice, peace and equity.

Call to Action

Neglected crises require coordinated, gender responsive strategies. Women with lived experiences of intersecting and prolonged crises – often overlooked by those in power and underfunded – continue to lead the response. Their insights must shape the design and implementation of programs. Government agencies, donors, INGOs, NGOs, civil society and UN partners should align resources and policies to support their recommendations, building resilient communities free from violence, poverty and marginalisation.

We urge all stakeholders to commit to supporting locally led initiatives–by recognising and resourcing women's leadership, honouring their voices, and ensuring their meaningful participation in decision-making processes–to foster sustainable and inclusive solutions.

Policy Recommendations:

For Ministry of Women and Social Affairs and INGOs/NGOs

Engage communities to challenge harmful gender norms through awareness campaigns in each Worada that involves both men and boys as allies in violence prevention.

Create safe and inclusive spaces for women's meaningful participation in local governance, humanitarian response planning, peacebuilding processes, and community decision-making processes.

Ensure that services reach marginalised groups, including displaced women, adolescent girls, and women with disabilities, by investing in trauma-informed training for social and community workers and embedding gender-sensitive approaches into protection and conflict prevention strategies.

Support long-term education and skills-building programs tailored to women's needs to strengthen their confidence, agency, and leadership.

Invest in economic justice initiatives that support women-led income-generating activities, access to microfinance, and cooperative models for financial and social resilience.

For Ministry of Justice

Strengthen legal and justice systems to hold perpetrators accountable and provide survivors with accessible, dignified assistance. Support community-based justice initiatives to improve accessibility and trust.

For Ministry of Health

Expand access to healthcare and psychosocial support, with mobile health units, improved transportation, and disability-inclusive infrastructure.

To all stakeholders

Promote meaningful women's participation and decision making during humanitarian responses in those neglected crises that enable them to ensure women's and girls' protection.

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References

1 Co-researcher: In Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) we use the term co-researcher instead of participant. This term recognises the equal relevance of everyone involved in the research as knowledge holders. FPAR seeks to move away from extractive research and therefore co-researchers validate analysis and findings.

2 The Power Walk is a participatory tool used in ActionAid's Feminist Research to illustrate how gender and other identity factors shape unequal access to rights, resources, and protection. Participants assume different social roles and respond to scenario-based prompts, making visible the power imbalances and systemic barriers faced by marginalised groups.

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