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Adolescent Drum Majorettes performing during 16 days of Activism at the Tongogara Refugee Camp, Zimbabwe December 2024, ©TDH/ Caroline Irvis

Strengthening Protection in Southern Africa Through Refugee Women's Leadership

Refugee Women - Led Organizations: Championing the Localization Agenda and Protecting Women and Girls from Violence in Southern Africa

Refugee women-led organizations (RWLOs) are a type of refugee-led organization (RLO), made up of refugee women who have experienced forced displacement. RLOs work to address the needs of refugees and other forcibly displaced populations by focusing on protection, socio-economic integration, and the provision of assistance.

In 2024, UNHCR supported seven RWLOs across five countries - Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. These organizations received small grants aimed at promoting community participation and ownership, supporting innovative projects and approaches[1], and developing sustainable, context-specific solutions. Through the *Safe from the Start* (SftS) initiative - an effort by the U.S. State Department to respond to violence against women and girls and support their empowerment - RWLOs also strengthened interventions to protect women and girls from violence.

This engagement aligns with UNHCR's community-based protection approach, which underscores the importance of working with forcibly displaced and stateless people, as well as host communities. Furthermore, both the **New York Declaration** and the **Global Compact on Refugees (GCR)** advocate for a "whole-of-society" approach and emphasize the importance of engaging directly with affected populations.

In 2024, RWLOs pioneered innovative approaches to strengthen women's economic empowerment and protection from violence while advancing localization[2] efforts across the five countries.

In Zambia, the Refugee Women-Led Organization (RWLO) **Amani Women's Group (AWG)** champions women's rights in Mantapala Refugee Settlement, located in Luapula Province. AWG is composed of 75 women from diverse backgrounds, including individuals from particularly vulnerable groups such as persons with disabilities and female-headed households.

In partnership with UNHCR and the Government of the Republic of Zambia (GRZ) - including the Commission for Refugees (COR), the Ministry of Health (MoH), and the Ministry of Education (MoE) —AWG implements a multi-sectoral approach to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls.

AWG members grinding supplementary food ingredients © UNHCR/Dora Chinyama

A Package of Sweet Mama Meal© UNHCR/ Dora Chinyama

[1] ttps://reporting.unhcr.org/document/9187
[2] Age, Gender and Diversity Accountability Report

In 2024, AWG, with support from SftS funding, promoted income-generating activities to enhance women's economic empowerment and reduce risks of violence. This was achieved through capacity building, community engagement, awareness campaigns, as well as income-generation initiatives such as supplementary food and soap production projects.

In collaboration with UNHCR, the District Nutrition Officer, Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) under the Ministry of Education, Action Africa Help (AAH)/World Food Programme (WFP), and Caritas Czech Republic (CCR), AWG trained 38 of its members in the production of low-cost supplementary food ("Sweet Mama Meal"), financial literacy, nutrition, children's rights and supplementary feeding for pregnant women and children. This initiative formed part of a broader effort to enhance violence risk mitigation through empowerment and awareness.

The training reached a total of 799 individuals—618 refugees and 181 Zambians—with key messages on nutrition, income generation, and violence prevention. AWG members diversified their business activities to enable the active participation of more women, fostering the creation of safe and inclusive spaces.

As a result, AWG generated a profit of ZMW 30,000, of which ZMW 700 was invested in constructing a shop at the market square to boost the visibility and sales of their products. Additionally, an acre of land was secured for farming to further expand their economic activities.

In 2024, AWG was also contracted by WFP and the Ministry of Education to grind 50kg of maize meal every three months for a school feeding programme, benefiting approximately 4,000 students. This contract represents a valuable ongoing income-generating opportunity for AWG.

In a similar effort, 53 women received training in soap-making and value addition, leading to the successful production and sale of high-quality, affordable sized soaps that attracted positive attention within the community.

The soap brand, *Amani Soap*, symbolizes the women's journey and underscores the vital link between peace and economic development—particularly in the prevention of violence.

Amani Women Group Soap production in Mantapala Refugee Settlement, Zambia ©UNHCR/ Dora Chinyama

Pieces of 'Amani Soap' product © UNHCR/ Dora Chinyama

In collaboration with UNHCR, the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services (MCDSS), the Commission for Refugees (COR), the Ministry of Health (MoH), and the Zambian Police Service's Victim Support Unit, AWG provided refresher training to 189 AWG members and community structures. These sessions covered key areas including the prevention of violence against women and girls, Community-Based Complaints and Feedback Mechanisms (CBCFM), Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA), protection

mainstreaming, and Accountability to Affected People (AAP). The training significantly strengthened collaboration and multi-sectoral responses to gender-based violence.

Community feedback on AWG's initiatives has been overwhelmingly positive. Women and girls, particularly from Block 12 in Mantapala Settlement and surrounding areas, reported greatly reduced travel distances to access the newly assembled grinding mill —established with support from the Ministry of Education—thereby decreasing their exposure to potential violence.

Following the implementation of the trainings and income-generating activities, male community members noted a positive shift, with one stating: ***"Our wives' self-esteem has improved, and violence in the home has decreased."*** Additionally, 68% of nursing mothers reported a reduction in malnutrition among children under five.

The education sector has also expressed strong support for the partnership between AWG, WFP, and the Ministry of Education in the school feeding programme. This collaboration not only boosted primary school enrollment to 100% but also provided students with opportunities to apply skills gained through Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET).

During the 16 Days of Activism campaign against gender-based violence, AWG organized community sensitization sessions and dialogues on the health-related consequences of violence, engaging 243 men and women. These efforts extended to three local schools under the theme "Creating Safe Spaces for Children—At Home and in School", reaching 374 refugees and national students.

As part of the school-based activities, students discussed the challenges posed by load shedding in boarding schools. In response, UNHCR distributed solar lanterns to refugee borders to reduce associated risks of violence and improve safety.

In collaboration with the Violence Sub-Working Group, AWG also conducted an outreach visit to the Nchelenge District Correctional Facility. There, they facilitated awareness sessions for both inmates and prison staff on violence prevention, mitigation, and response. To support the initiative, AWG donated 200 bars of Amani Soap, fostering goodwill and strengthening collaboration on protection efforts within the facility.

In Malawi, community-driven initiatives by Refugee Women-Led Organizations (RWLOs) in Dzaleka Refugee Camp have catalyzed impactful interventions to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls. With support from the Safe from the Start (SftS) initiative, RWLOs - **Young Girls Empowerment Group, Women for Action, and Solidarity of Refugee Women for the Social Welfare** have driven meaningful transformation within the camp and neighboring host communities, directly reaching 49,070 refugees and local residents.

Through innovative methods such as theatre performances, storytelling, mentorship, capacity-building, and awareness campaigns, these organizations empowered communities to take a leading role in combating violence.

Refugee women performing create awareness on violence Dzaleka camp, Malawi
©SOFERES/ Merlin Phillip

The interventions addressed both immediate protection needs and longer-term goals by promoting financial independence, challenging harmful gender norms, and strengthening community support structures.

The success of these efforts highlights the importance of the localization agenda in fostering sustainable, survivor-centered responses. By advancing collective action and inclusive approaches, the initiative not only empowered vulnerable individuals but also nurtured resilience and hope across the broader community—paving the way for a safer and more equitable environment for all.

Solidarity of Refugee Women for the Social Welfare (SOFERES) pioneered an innovative, community-based approach to combating violence through theatre performances, awareness campaigns, and radio dramas. These creative platforms were used to challenge cultural taboos, spark critical dialogue, and raise awareness across the community. Through this initiative, over 45,200 individuals were reached, fostering open discussions, providing safe spaces for survivors, and delivering educational messaging through storytelling-ultimately leading to increased reporting of violence and stronger community support networks.

With the support of UNHCR, SOFERES also engaged youth advocacy groups to organize a workshop for 180 women-led organization (WLO) leaders. The training focused on survivor-centered approaches, legal frameworks, and community mobilization techniques. This not only enhanced participants' knowledge and skills but also encouraged broader community engagement. Through inclusive dialogue, the initiative successfully raised awareness of violence among key stakeholders, including community elders, influencers, traditional authorities, and religious leaders.

As a result, approximately 200 men publicly pledged to combat violence in their homes and communities, while around 80 influential leaders committed to fostering a safer environment for women and girls in Dzaleka Refugee Camp—many making these pledges during post-performance community dialogues. Additionally, 500 women and girls reported feeling more empowered to speak out against violence and advocate for their rights.

"I always thought violence in the home was normal, but after watching the performance, I understand that it's not. I now know my rights and how I can protect myself", ***[Community Member, Dzaleka Refugee Camp, Malawi]***

"The theatre performance showed me that violence is not just a women's issue—it's a community issue. I now feel responsible for speaking out against violence in my own family and neighborhood." ***[A refugee man from DRC, community participant from Dzaleka Camp, Malawi]***

The Young Girls Empowerment Group (YGEG) effectively utilized the funding to implement a project focused on violence prevention and the empowerment of women and girls. Through awareness campaigns held during the 16 Days of Activism and regular outreach efforts, a total of 3,000 community members were educated on violence prevention and response. Additionally, 500 girls were informed about how to report cases of violence and access support services, while 150 women and girls received vocational skills training, fostering their financial independence.

Women for Action (W4A) implemented the Girl Shine project, addressing the unique vulnerabilities of adolescent girls. Through door-to-door awareness campaigns targeting families of girls at risk of violence, the initiative successfully increased understanding and garnered support.

A total of 40 girls graduated from a training programme focused on violence prevention and life skills, reporting enhanced confidence and knowledge that empowered them to recognize and report cases of violence. Meanwhile, parents embraced positive parenting techniques, fostering safer home environments for girls.

Exaucee Kabori / 17 years, giving a speech at Girl Shine graduation ceremony, Dzaleka Refugee Camp, Malawi ©WFA/Giresse Lwamba

Community engagement activities with local leaders further strengthened a collective commitment to protecting adolescent girls. Additionally, the inclusion of a mentorship programme and safe spaces promoted resilience, driving lasting behavioural changes within the community.

> *"Before joining the mentorship programme, I was on the verge of dropping out of school since I found it hard to study and take care of my child. Now, I have a place where I get encouraged to keep going", **[A refugee living in Dzaleka Refugee Camp, Malawi]***

In Mozambique, RWLOs spearheaded violence prevention and response initiatives in the Maratane refugee settlement by engaging men and boys, producing reusable menstrual pads, raising awareness about menstruation, and establishing reporting mechanisms through community outreach. **The Association of Refugees in Mozambique (ARM)** led a project aimed at strengthening violence prevention in the education sector for both refugees and host communities. This included training students, teachers, and administrators on how to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls, alongside the establishment of student-led "Safe Roots Groups."

Four TOTs in Maratane Refugee Settlement, Mozambique showcasing reusable menstrual pads © UNHCR/ Rainy Kazi

Regarding menstrual health and hygiene, four trainees completed a "training of trainers" (TOT) course on producing reusable menstrual pads and managing menstrual health. This resulted in 30 adolescent girls benefiting from a three-day workshop on creating reusable menstrual pads and learning about menstruation. Following the workshop, awareness sessions were held, reaching 155 girls and women in schools and the Maratane refugee community. These sessions improved girls' confidence in menstrual hygiene management, empowering them to make and use reusable pads, which in turn enhanced school attendance and supported violence prevention and response efforts.

"It's good that we are now implementing the project for our community by ourselves, which not only builds capacity but also ensures the sustainability of the programme." ***[Ismail Abraham / refugee leader, [Maratane Refugee Settlement, Mozambique]***

A specialized training session on the prevention of and response to violence against women and girls was conducted to engage men and boys, followed by post-training awareness sessions that reached 250 participants. Additionally, 30 students from the "Safe Roots Groups" received training on violence prevention, along with guidance on their roles and responsibilities in utilizing reporting mechanisms effectively. A total of 12 teachers, principals, and school administrators were sensitized and actively engaged throughout the sessions, fostering a strong foundation for collaboration, full support, and alignment with the project's goals and objectives. Furthermore, ARM members were trained in basket knitting, a skill that promotes hygiene, environmental protection, and economic empowerment through income generation.

ARM Members Knitting Baskets as a Project to Conserve Environment and Generate Income, Maratane Settlement, Nampula, November © UNHCR/ Rainy Kazi

"Thanks to the training, I have gained knowledge and life skills that have empowered me. I can now make and sell baskets, which has helped me earn income. I hope this support continues for the many women and girls living in this settlement." ***[Rose Assumane, Young Woman from Congo]***

In Botswana, the *Safety on Tap* project, led by **The Women's Forum** in the Dukwi refugee camp, aims to reduce violence and enhance services for at-risk women and girls. The project tackles the root causes of violence—including harmful cultural practices—by establishing safe spaces where women and girls receive holistic support. These spaces are facilitated by trained refugee volunteers, known as safe space mentors, who are uniquely positioned to guide and support survivors of violence.

Key project activities include peer education, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), sexual and reproductive health education, access to justice, and economic empowerment, all designed to foster long-term resilience.

As part of the initiative, The Women's Forum launched a poultry project in Dukwi, starting with 300 broilers. The project generated a profit of BWP 16,000 (approximately USD 1,500), which was reinvested to purchase an additional 200 broilers—further promoting women's economic empowerment, self-reliance, and project sustainability. The Women's Forum reported increased income among members, contributing to a reduction in violence risks. Plans are underway to expand the project further.

Poultry Project in Dukwi Refugee settlement, Botswana, November 2024 @UNHCR / Daisy Mbopi

The Women's Forum, in collaboration with Women Against Rape (WAR), a local civil society organization, and UNHCR, organized a four-day training for 12 safe space mentors. The training equipped participants with essential skills in violence response, UNHCR policies, comprehensive sexual education, communication, referral pathways, and techniques for organizing group activities.

Following the training, case workers established six safe space groups comprising a total of 120 participants. These groups, facilitated by the trained mentors, engage in a variety of recreational and livelihood activities—such as sewing, hairdressing, baking, and sports—which serve as vital sources of psychosocial support for women and girls.

Mentors engaging girls in violence discussions during recreational and livelihood, Dukwi Refugee Settlement, Botswana @UNHCR /Daisy Mbopi

During the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence, The Women's Forum, through the *Safety on Tap* project, organized a series of preventive outreach activities, including panel discussions, art exhibitions, and film screenings. These events fostered meaningful dialogue on human rights and raised awareness among 250 community members.

The initiative specifically engaged 100 men, boys, and community leaders, helping to deepen understanding, challenge harmful cultural perceptions, and promote collective action to prevent violence against women and girls.

The Women's Forum, in collaboration with the Dukwi Children's Council, facilitated a visit for 60 refugee children to the Broadhurst Child-Friendly Centre in Gaborone, an initiative established by the Botswana Police Service and UNICEF. During the visit, the children gained valuable skills and knowledge on child-friendly interviewing techniques, personal safety, safe reporting mechanisms, and appropriate responses to child abuse cases. They also learned how to build trust, recognize signs of abuse, and advocate for the safety and rights of children. This initiative contributed to fostering a stronger culture of child protection, promoting resilience, and preventing violence, abuse, and neglect.

*"I always want to emphasize the importance of us men taking a leading role in the fight against violence and protecting our women and children", **[refugee man from Burundi]***

*"Being in a safe space group meant that my friends and I got to do something different instead of talking to boys. You know how it is in the camp, the only interesting thing is boys, so safe space activities were fun and exciting!" **[Mary, an asylum seeker youth from DRC].***

In Zimbabwe, Terre des Hommes (TDH), through the Girl Shine initiative, mentored 280 women and adolescent girls, empowering them with knowledge and skills related to early marriage prevention and life skills. This contributed significantly to violence prevention efforts and the strengthening of institutional responses through a survivor-centered approach.

TDH, in collaboration with UNHCR, strengthened the integration of child protection into violence prevention and response programming through a two-day training for 45 child-led Child Protection Committees (CPCs). The training focused on enhancing their understanding of child protection principles, their roles and responsibilities, and effective advocacy for children's rights and strategies to safeguard children—particularly girls—from violence. It also promoted child participation and reinforced the role of community-based, child-led organizations in identifying and mitigating protection risks.

Additionally, in collaboration with the Department of Social Development, TDH trained 35 individuals—including community case workers, leaders, rehabilitation assistants, violence focal persons, Engaging Men in Accountable Practices (EMAP) participants, Girl Shine mentors, and community volunteers—to improve their capacity in violence case management and provide quality care and support to survivors.

EMAP Facilitator engaging with violence Messaging Tongogara Refugee Camp, Zimbabwe, December 2024 ©UNHCR Jonathan Bukasa

A cultural indaba involving representatives from 20 tribes, predominantly from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), was held to explore the root causes of violence and raise awareness about harmful cultural practices, human rights, and the importance of promoting positive cultural values. This community-led dialogue resulted in the development of a cultural practices directory and a strategy to engage traditional leaders in ongoing discussions to address violence in Tongogara Refugee Settlement.

During the 16 Days of Activism, over 1,500 people participated in solidarity activities aimed at preventing violence and promoting a culture of safety and respect.

EMAP Refugee facilitator performing a drama on violence prevention messaging, Tongogara Refugee Camp, Zimbabwe, November 2024 ©UNHCR David Hernest

Besides, TDH and UNHCR facilitated a refresher training for 28 men and boys under the Engaging Men in Accountable Practices (EMAP) violence prevention model. EMAP-trained refugee facilitators conducted awareness sessions on harmful cultural practices, the EMAP framework, and safe referral pathways, reaching 330 refugees and asylum seekers - including community leaders, persons with disabilities, and new arrivals.

Girl Led Training, Tongogara Refugee Settlement, Zimbabwe © UNHCR /Caroline Irvis

Youth mentors, all aged 35 and under, received specialized training to enhance their mentorship and facilitation skills using the Girl Shine life skills and early marriage prevention curriculum. These trained mentors went on to implement the programme, reaching 220 adolescent girls and youth.

Two Girl Shine groups, comprising 40 young people, successfully completed a 52-session curriculum focused on life skills development. Meanwhile, 75 caregivers participated in the Girl Shine caregiver programme, which supports positive parenting and family involvement in violence prevention.

To further strengthen community knowledge of child protection, case management, and the provision of quality care for survivors, TDH, in partnership with the Department of Social Development, trained 35 community members, reinforcing local capacity for sustainable, community-led protection efforts.

> *"Once a girl gets married it's difficult to get support from the community, family and spouse. Girl shine gives me a platform to freely express myself without fear and victimization",* ***[Girl shine early marriage participant.]***

Conclusion

In conclusion, the SftS funding has proven to be a catalyst for transformative change, significantly advancing women's empowerment, violence prevention, and UNHCR's localization agenda. By prioritizing support for community-based initiatives and women-led local organizations, UNHCR has witnessed measurable improvements in the lives of refugee women and girls. These include increased participation in decision-making, greater access to education and economic opportunities, and strengthened protection from violence.

The SftS funding has also deepened UNHCR's commitment to localization by enabling meaningful partnerships with local organizations and communities. These collaborations have resulted in protection responses that are more context-specific, sustainable, and aligned with the needs and priorities of the communities they serve.

This funding has laid a solid foundation for sustained progress, reinforcing the importance of continued investment in grassroots, women-led efforts and inclusive participatory approaches. As we move forward, it is critical to build on this momentum - scaling up support for community-based protection, promoting equitable decision-making, and amplifying the voices and leadership of refugee women and girls.

Ultimately, the impact of the SftS initiative highlights the power of collective action and community-led solutions in advancing protection, dignity, and equality. Continued investment in women's empowerment is not only essential for achieving durable solutions, but also for building a more just and equitable future for all.

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