

WOMEN IN HUMANITARIAN CAREERS:

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN THE WEST AFRICAN CONTEXT



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report explores the drivers and impediments affecting West African women’s entry into and advancement within the professional humanitarian assistance sector, with a focus on international contexts. The report contributes to the project “Capacity Building for Humanitarian Assistance in West Africa” (HAWA), a project coordinated by the Austrian Centre for Peace (ACP) in cooperation with the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC), funded by the Austrian Development Cooperation (ADC) and supported by the Austrian Ministry of Defense (MoD). It is designed for policymakers, humanitarian organizations, and stakeholders committed to promoting gender equity and inclusion within the humanitarian sector. It addresses critical structural barriers that may have been underexplored in this region and sector previously. This study dives deeper into the intersectionality of gender, professional networks, and career progression within humanitarian settings, shedding light on systemic issues like sexual harassment, limited access to leadership roles, and inadequate support structures. Particular value is added by providing nuanced, localized data that can inform the gender strategies of HAWA but also of other projects and organizations in the West African region, making them more context-specific and actionable.

The primary objectives of this research were to identify key motivations for women pursuing careers in humanitarian assistance, to analyze the barriers they encounter in advancing their careers, and to propose recommendations for reducing those barriers in this field. The study utilized a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods, including surveys and key informant interviews, conducted across five West African countries: Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, and Niger. A total of 69 respondents with varied demographic backgrounds participated in the survey. These respondents included individuals currently working in humanitarian assistance, those with prior experience in the sector, and individuals occupying various leadership levels, sectors, and roles related to humanitarian operations and gender empowerment. In addition to the survey participants, 7 key informants who were not part of the 69 survey respondents provided in-depth insights through interviews, offering further qualitative perspectives.

Key Findings

Drivers for Entering Humanitarian Assistance:

The overwhelming majority of female respondents (94.2%) cited personal interest in humanitarian work as their primary motivation for entering the sector. Another significant motivator was prior volunteer experience (37.7%), highlighting the importance of hands-on involvement in shaping career paths in humanitarian assistance. 33.3% of female respondents were driven by their academic qualifications, particularly those with advanced degrees in fields such as international relations and public health. Notably, 53.6% of participants mentioned that the scarcity of job opportunities influenced their decision to pursue a career in humanitarian work, indicating that the sector often serves as a viable career option for those facing limited employment prospects elsewhere.

Impediments to Career Advancement:

53% of female respondents reported that gender hindered their career progression. Women face systemic biases in organizational structures, which hinder their ascent to leadership positions. The absence of robust professional women leaders’ collectives and networks was identified as the most common challenge, with 64% of female respondents citing it as a major obstacle. This suggests that access to mentorship, networking, and professional collaborations remains limited for many women. Several respondents highlighted coercive practices, including sexual advances as a pathway to promotion, reflecting a toxic work culture that disproportionately affects women. Stringent recruitment standards that emphasize advanced degrees and specific certifications further exclude many women who possess practical experience but lack formal qualifications.

Institutional Barriers:

Insufficient financial support for women-centric initiatives was frequently cited as a critical structural barrier. Without adequate funding, opportunities for capacity building and career advancement are severely limited. The political landscape in West Africa poses challenges to humanitarian operations and limits women’s career opportunities in these settings. While conflicts and disasters may create job opportunities in the humanitarian sector, they also introduce significant barriers to women’s participation and advancement, as they often exacerbate existing gender inequalities and vulnerabilities, and increase safety issues for humanitarian

workers. Cultural norms can also limit women being at the forefront of humanitarian assistance, hence requiring strategic interventions to ensure inclusivity and gender equity.

Recommendations

To address the barriers faced by West African women in humanitarian assistance, this report offers targeted recommendations for different stakeholders, including humanitarian organizations, governments, international organizations.

Humanitarian organizations and governments:

Recognizing that women in the humanitarian sector have unique needs and face distinct challenges, the following recommendations outline essential actions that humanitarian organizations and governments must take to foster a more equitable and inclusive environment for women in humanitarian assistance.

- **Strengthen Collaboration with Grassroots Organizations:** Establish sustainable partnerships with local women’s rights groups and create dialogue platforms involving community leaders and security actors to promote culturally sensitive and inclusive approaches.
- **Integrate Gender Equity within Organizational Practices:** Enforce gender policies aligned with international frameworks such as CEDAW and UNSCR 1325, ensuring women’s participation and gender-sensitive budgeting across all programs.
- **Transform Organizational Norms for Gender Inclusivity:** Review recruitment and promotion processes, implement gender quotas, establish mentorship programs, and promote work-life balance policies, including flexible work arrangements and training on gender-based violence prevention.
- **Conduct Regular Gender Audits:** Implement periodic gender audits to identify gaps in gender equity efforts. Collaborate with professional women’s networks to monitor progress and ensure accountability within organizations.
- **Address Gender-Based Violence (GBV):** Enforce zero-tolerance GBV policies within humanitarian settings, establish transparent reporting mechanisms, and pro-

vide training for security personnel in GBV prevention and response protocols. Also, implementing robust anti-harassment policies and ensuring their enforcement is essential for creating a safe and equitable work environment for women.

- **Flexible Work Arrangements:** Offering flexible work options and support services like childcare can help women balance professional and familial responsibilities, enabling them to pursue career advancement.
- **Reconsider Recruitment Standards and Practices:** Organizations should reconsider relaxing rigid qualification requirements and emphasizing practical experience alongside formal education. This would open doors for a wider range of candidates, particularly women with on-the-ground experience.

International Development Agencies and Donors:

International organizations play a pivotal role in advancing gender equity initiatives within the humanitarian sector by providing essential funding, curating mentorship programs, and facilitating collective bargaining through networks. Their support enables the development of sustainable frameworks that promote women’s leadership and participation while ensuring that gender-sensitive approaches are integrated into humanitarian policies and practices.

- **Invest in Mentorship and Capacity Building:** Develop leadership training programs and provide mentorship opportunities tailored to enhance women’s competencies in strategic fields.
- **Support the Implementation of Gender Equity Policies and Advocate for Legal Reforms:** Align support with international standards, advocating for legal reforms that mandate women’s involvement in leadership and peace processes in West African countries.

Research Institutions and Policymakers:

Research institutions and policymakers are instrumental in shaping effective gender equity initiatives within the humanitarian sector, as well as establishing best practices and norms. Their influence is vital in creating frameworks that not only promote women’s leadership and participation but also ensure that gender-sensitive approaches are integrated into humanitarian policies and practices.

- **Increase Research on Gender Disparities:** Collect and analyze gender-disaggregated data to guide evidence-based advocacy, inform policies, and enhance the representation and advancement of women in leadership roles within the humanitarian sector.
- **Support Country-Specific Gender Advocacy:** Collaborate with governments and grassroots organizations to align national frameworks with international standards and mobilize for gender-equity reforms tailored to each country’s context.

Governments and Policymakers:

- **Implementation of Gender Equity Policies and Legal Reforms:** Align with international standards, and implement legal reforms that mandate women’s involvement in leadership and peace processes in West African countries.

Conclusion:

While significant progress has been made in improving women’s representation in the humanitarian sector, West African women continue to face barriers to career entry and progression. Addressing these challenges requires targeted interventions, including the establishment of inclusive recruitment policies, professional networking opportunities, and stronger organizational support for gender equality. Enhanced funding for women’s programs and the promotion of gender-sensitive organizational practices are crucial for fostering a more inclusive humanitarian workforce. Research and impact studies, highlight that increasing women’s representation, especially in leadership and decision-making roles, leads to improved humanitarian programming and outcomes¹. Greater female leadership contributes to more effective integration of gender considerations, which is critical in contexts where crises disproportionately affect women, girls, and marginalized groups due to entrenched gender norms and discrimination. The participation of women as first responders has been recognized as essential to effective disaster response, gender-sensitive disaster risk reduction (DRR) efforts, which improved community-level preparedness, response, and recovery outcomes. By ensuring women have equal rights and opportunities in humanitarian careers, organizations can bring diverse perspectives, improve community engagement, and better address the needs of those most affected by crises, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness and inclusivity of humanitarian responses.

This report identifies the primary drivers and barriers affecting the career trajectories of West African women in humanitarian assistance, offering valuable localized insights for the HAWA project and beyond. The study reveals that while personal interest, volunteer experience, and academic qualifications motivate women’s entry into the sector, systemic barriers such as gender discrimination, lack of professional networks, and coercive work environments hinder their advancement. The report emphasizes the need for targeted interventions by humanitarian organizations, governments, and international agencies to promote gender equity. By adopting these measures, stakeholders can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for women in humanitarian assistance, ensuring their leadership and participation are effectively enhanced.

LIST OF ABBREVIATION

ACP	Austrian Centre for Peace
ADC	Austrian Development Cooperation
CARE	Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere
CAWI	Computer Assisted Web Interviewing
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CERF	Central Emergency Response Fund
DDR	Disaster Risk Reduction
HAWA	Humanitarian Assistance in West Africa
HR	Human Resources
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
JNIM	Jama’at Nusrat ul-Islam wal-Muslimeen
KAIPTC	Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping And Training Centre
KII	Key Informant Interview
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex or Queer
MFDC	Mouvement des forces démocratiques de Casamance
MoD	Ministry of Defense
NADMO	National Disaster Management Organization
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
UN	United Nations
UN OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution

1. INTRODUCTION

Women’s participation in professional humanitarian assistance is crucial for addressing the diverse needs of crisis-affected populations. Despite their significant contributions at the community level, women remain underrepresented in the international humanitarian workforce. While they constitute over 40% of frontline humanitarian workers, they hold only 27% of senior leadership roles, such as United Nations Humanitarian Coordinators. Recent data from the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) in 2024 indicates that out of the 37 current humanitarian coordinators—the highest-ranking UN officials in countries experiencing humanitarian emergencies—only 10 are women. In the broader non-profit sector, including humanitarian organizations, women make up 75% of the workforce but only 43% occupy CEO positions. This disparity underscores the need for targeted efforts to elevate women into leadership roles, ensuring their perspectives shape humanitarian responses at all levels. This underrepresentation not only reflects broader global trends but also underscores a significant gap in regional data that addresses the unique barriers faced by West African women in this sector. The intersection of gender, culture, and socio-economic factors creates a complex landscape that influences the career trajectories of West African women in humanitarian roles. This study seeks to explore these dynamics by examining both the drivers that encourage and the impediments that hinder West African women from pursuing and advancing in professional humanitarian careers within international contexts.

Drawing on an intersectional framework, this study will investigate how multiple identities, such as gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, intersect to shape the experiences of these women. By understanding the specific challenges they face—ranging from cultural norms and discriminatory practices to structural barriers within international organizations—this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the factors that contribute to their underrepresentation in the humanitarian sector. Additionally, the study will identify enablers that can support their entry and career progression, offering insights into policies and practices that could promote greater inclusion and equity. Ultimately, this research seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on gender equality in the humanitarian sector, with a focus on empowering women from West Africa to take on leader-

ship roles and enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian responses globally.

This study is part of the project “Capacity Development for Humanitarian Assistance in West Africa – Phase IV” (HAWA IV), a project coordinated by the Austrian Centre for Peace (ACP) in cooperation with the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC), funded by the Austrian Development Cooperation (ADC) and supported by the Austrian Ministry of Defense (MoD). The project contributes to strengthening capacities for effective humanitarian crisis response in West African States. In order to be effective and inclusive, humanitarian assistance needs to be gender-responsive. This study contributes to the project’s aim by addressing the structural and systemic barriers women face in this field. It delves deeper into issues such as sexual exploitation, inadequate access to networks, and limited career advancement opportunities—findings that may not have been fully addressed in existing humanitarian organizations. The findings further highlight the lived experiences of women, especially in navigating power dynamics within humanitarian contexts, thus providing recommendations for humanitarian organizations to promote gender equality within their structures. The findings also inform HAWA’s capacity-building efforts with concrete evidence to advocate for reforms that promote women empowerment.

1.1. Overview of the Global Humanitarian Sector

The global humanitarian sector is tasked with addressing unprecedented levels of need driven by a convergence of crises, including conflicts, climate emergencies, and economic instability. In 2024, nearly 300 million people worldwide will require humanitarian assistance and protection, marking a significant increase in need from previous years². These needs are most pronounced in regions such as East and Southern Africa, West and Central Africa, and the Middle East, where conflicts and climatic disasters have severely impacted populations. The humanitarian sector is challenged by the growing complexity of these crises, as evidenced by the dramatic rise in displaced populations and acute food insecurity affecting millions³.

Conflicts remain a dominant force behind the escalating humanitarian needs, with protracted and newly erupted

conflicts causing widespread devastation. The year 2023 witnessed severe escalations in regions like Sudan, Syria, and Palestine, leading to a spike in civilian casualties and displacement. Alongside conflict, the global climate emergency is exacerbating vulnerabilities, with extreme weather events causing mass displacement and threatening food security across multiple continents⁴. These factors, compounded by economic challenges and disease outbreaks, create a multifaceted crisis landscape that requires a robust and adaptable humanitarian response.

In response to these growing needs, the global humanitarian sector is mobilizing resources and strategies to deliver aid effectively and efficiently⁵. For 2024, the United Nations (UN) and its partner organizations are appealing for \$46.4 billion to assist 180.5 million people across 72 countries. The focus is increasingly on localized and inclusive responses, with a quarter of Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) funding now directed to local and national partners who play a critical role as first responders⁶. Additionally, the sector is emphasizing the importance of humanitarian diplomacy and access negotiations in conflict zones, striving to maintain and expand the delivery of life-saving aid in increasingly hostile environments.

1.2. Underrepresentation of Women In The Humanitarian Sector

The underrepresentation of women in the humanitarian sector remains a significant challenge, despite the essential roles women play in crisis response and aid delivery. Research highlights that women are often concentrated in lower-level positions, particularly in frontline roles, while they are starkly underrepresented in leadership and decision-making roles. For example, within the UN system, women constitute about 70% of entry-level staff but only 37% at senior decision-making levels⁷. This disparity is mirrored across the humanitarian sector, where women make up over 40% of frontline workers but are drastically underrepresented in top leadership positions⁸. The lack of female leadership not only reflects broader gender inequalities but also limits the sector's ability to address the specific needs and challenges faced by women and girls in humanitarian crises.

This underrepresentation has far-reaching implications. The absence of women in leadership roles within multila-

teral organizations often results in a lack of gender-sensitive policies and practices, which are crucial for effective humanitarian responses. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the limited inclusion of women in decision-making positions within global task forces was associated with a slower and less comprehensive response to the gendered impacts of the crisis⁹. The pandemic highlighted the need for female leadership to ensure that the unique needs of women and girls are adequately addressed in humanitarian efforts. Without greater representation of women in leadership roles, the humanitarian sector risks perpetuating gender inequalities and failing to fully leverage the perspectives and skills that women bring to crisis management.

1.3. Purpose And Objectives Of The Study

This study seeks to explore the drivers and impediments for women from West Africa entering professional humanitarian assistance and advancing their careers in international contexts. It aims to inform humanitarian organizations, including the ACP and the KAIPTC, and donors in uncovering how the interplay of gender, cultural norms, socio-economic background, and other identities impacts the career trajectories of West African women within this sector. The ultimate goal is to generate insights that can inform policies and practices aimed at promoting greater inclusion and equity, thereby enhancing the diversity and effectiveness of the global humanitarian workforce. In order to achieve this purpose, the following objectives were set to be met:

1. To identify and analyze the drivers that encourage West African women to join humanitarian assistance.
2. To explore the impediments West African women face in career progression within international contexts.
3. To provide recommendations for enhancing diversity and inclusion in the humanitarian sector.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Context-Specific Analysis of Gender Relations

At its core, gender is not simply a biological distinction based on sex, but rather a complex interplay of cultural, social, and psychological factors that shape individuals' identities and interactions within society. Gender refers to the social, cultural, and psychological characteristics, roles, behaviors, and attributes that a society considers appropriate for individuals based on their perceived or assigned sex¹⁰. While sex typically refers to the biological characteristics such as anatomy and chromosomes that categorize individuals as male, female, or intersex, gender encompasses a broader range of identities, expressions, and experiences beyond the binary understanding of male and female.

Gender roles are socially constructed norms that dictate the behaviors, attitudes, and responsibilities deemed appropriate for individuals based on their perceived gender identity. These roles are often deeply ingrained in cultural traditions, historical contexts, and institutional structures, influencing everything from family dynamics to professional aspirations. From a young age, individuals are socialized into these gender roles through various agents of socialization, including family, peers, media, and education. For instance, in many contexts boys are encouraged to be strong, assertive, and independent, while girls are socialized to be nurturing, empathetic, and compliant in many societal contexts¹¹. These expectations not only shape individual identities but also perpetuate gender inequalities and reinforce stereotypes that limit personal expression and opportunities for both men and women.

Gender intersects with social categories like age, race, class, sexuality, and disability, creating complex systems of privilege and oppression, known as intersectionality. For example, women of color may face discrimination based on both gender and race, leading to unique forms of marginalization. Similarly, individuals with disabilities encounter added barriers to fulfilling gender roles and accessing opportunities¹². Social institutions like the media, religion, and government policies reinforce traditional gender norms. The media often perpetuates harmful stereotypes, while religi-

ous beliefs and practices shape cultural understandings of gender within communities¹³.

2.2. The Gender and Conflict Analysis In West Africa

In recent discourses on conflict management and disaster risk management and response, gender and conflicts are treated as closely related. In recent years, the West African region has been characterized by multiple interconnected armed conflicts. Several UN organizations have established frameworks to analyze and assess conflicts to facilitate operations in conflict-prone areas around the West African region, however, empirical studies are revealing the absence or unavailability of monitoring and assessment frameworks that consider gender relations and gender inequality as drivers that inform dynamics of conflict¹⁴¹⁵.

The humanitarian situation in West African countries is a complex and multifaceted issue that encompasses a range of challenges, including armed conflict, political instability, economic crises, environmental degradation, and widespread poverty. Across the region, millions of people are affected by these various factors, leading to displacement, food insecurity, lack of access to healthcare and education, and violations of human rights¹⁶. The situation in many West African countries has severely deteriorated; climate and weather-related disasters are causing massive humanitarian impacts and extremist, or militant attacks spread to new areas. The already increased levels of vulnerability (i.e. caused by food insecurity, poverty, heightened risk of sexual and gender-based violence) are amplified by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic¹⁷.

Although the security situation in the SENEGALESE CASAMANCE region had calmed down relatively since the signing of the peace agreement in 2004, a „war economy“ around the trade in drugs and precious woods repeatedly led to a flare-up of violence. Various rebel factions, including among others the Mouvement des forces démocratiques de Casamance (MFDC), finance their equipment with this illicit trafficking and contributions from foreign donors¹⁸. In 2021, the Senegalese Army, supported by the military of Guinea-Bissau, began an offensive against the MFDC and overran three MFDC bases in Blaze Forest, seized several hectares of marijuana cultivation and a significant amount of rebel

weaponry, but several rebel bases remain active. While the Senegalese government hopes that the military offensive will prevent criminal activities that would finance the various rebel fractions, the food insecurity as a result of recurrent flooding and droughts as effects of climate change might fuel existing ethnic and religious tensions and the separatist movement¹⁹. The 2024 Senegalese elections exacerbated these tensions, especially in Casamance, where political divisions stoked conflict. The pre-election period saw an increase in clashes between pro-government forces and rebel factions, with both sides seeking to leverage the political instability for strategic gains²⁰.

NIGERIA's complex humanitarian crisis has different major problems depending on the region. Food insecurity, caused by multiple factors is one of the widest spread humanitarian challenges. A further challenge are overlapping security crises including Jihadism, banditry and kidnapping, clashes between herders and farmers and separatist insurgency²¹. The northeast is tattered by Boko Haram, the northwest is facing surging banditry violence including killings, kidnappings for ransom, cattle rustling, and sexual violence in communities, and the population in the Middle Belt is suffering from farmer/herder conflicts. In the south, Nigeria hosts more than 60,000 refugees from Cameroon while cholera outbreaks occur annually. Also, the prevalence of food insecurity in Nigeria rose markedly, escalating from 66.2 million individuals in the first quarter of 2023 to 100 million in the first quarter of 2024²². As of March 2024, 18.6 million individuals experienced acute hunger, while 43.7 million employed crisis-level or more severe hunger coping strategies²³. Nigeria's inflation rate (34.19%), which has remained persistently high in recent years, further exacerbates existing humanitarian crises in West Africa hence affecting vulnerable populations, including displaced persons and impoverished communities²⁴.

Additionally, MALI, NIGER and BURKINA FASO have experienced an eight-fold increase of fatalities, up to more than 6000, in 2020. Since 2017, the Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM), which emerged from alliances of Ansar Dine, the Macina Liberation Front, Al-Mourabitoun and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), rapidly drives violent extremism from Mali to Niger and Burkina Faso, currently expanding its focus to coastal West African states and worsening in the cross-border area between Burkina Faso and Benin, North West Nigeria and Maradi (Niger)²⁵.

While GHANA is relatively good in domestic disaster response with a functional National Disaster Management Organization (NADMO), on the political side it has been grappling with significant legal and societal challenges concerning LGBTQ+ rights²⁶. The Ghanaian legal framework, influenced by colonial-era laws, criminalizes homosexual acts, contributing to widespread discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals. Ghana further faces increasing border threats and insecurity, particularly along its northern and western borders which are vulnerable to instability from neighboring countries like Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire. Armed groups, including extremists and militants, have also become more active in the Sahel region, leading to cross-border spillovers of violence, smuggling, and human trafficking²⁷.

From the above, it is clear that the threats to security in West Africa are largely intrastate in nature; rendering state- and military-centered security almost irrelevant. The referent of security is no longer just the state, but also the individual (human) and their security is linked to their all-round development (economic, political, social and ecological); access to justice including respect for their human rights and the rule of law; a conducive environment in which to operate; and in situations of complex emergencies, rapid and sustained humanitarian assistance. An understanding of the differing impact of insecurities on men and women is thus crucial for effectively meeting the human security needs outlined above. It is against this backdrop that this section analyzes the gender dimensions of the human security challenges in West Africa²⁸.

2.3. Women's Multiple Roles as Combatants, Peacebuilders And Victims

In an era of protracted conflicts, the role and contribution of women within the conflict and humanitarian assistance domain has become increasingly important to understand and subsequently address the divergent needs of conflict-affected populations. However, women's leadership within this domain has not attracted the same high-level attention as that in similar areas like global health more broadly²⁹. Studies on gender and leadership suggest that there are gendered differences in leadership styles; women tend to have a different yet complementary leadership style to men due to skills and strategies learnt whilst overcoming systemic

barriers during their long stay in the mid-career phase³⁰. A survey conducted by United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) of over 1000 women humanitarians in 115 countries found three unique attributes women bring to humanitarian action: firstly, the ability to speak to women from affected communities; secondly, unique perspectives; and lastly, a unique style of leadership³¹. Women's representation and engagement in leadership roles would put their issues at the front of the global agenda, challenge the traditional hierarchies of knowledge and power by highlighting undervalued and unrecognized knowledge, and advocate for more inclusive, diverse and representative decisions³².

2.4. Gender-Based Constraints and Opportunities in Humanitarian Settings in West Africa

Gender-based constraints and opportunities within humanitarian settings are critical considerations in ensuring the effectiveness, inclusivity, and sustainability of aid interventions in crisis-affected communities. Humanitarian crises, whether caused by conflict, natural disasters, or other emergencies, often exacerbate existing gender inequalities and vulnerabilities, making it essential for aid organizations to address gender dynamics in their response efforts³³. These constraints and opportunities profoundly impact humanitarian workers engaged in humanitarian assistance programs, influencing their roles, experiences, and effectiveness in delivering aid to vulnerable populations. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for addressing the diverse needs of communities affected by crises and promoting gender equality within humanitarian response efforts³⁴.

The Global Gender Gap Report 2020 states that persistent gender inequality in leadership is a significant global economic risk and obstacle for human development. The average human development index for women is 6% lower than that of men, with countries in the low development category suffering the widest gaps – which tend also to be countries impacted by conflict and humanitarian crises³⁵. In addition, leaders in this sector need diverse and adaptable skill sets that allow them to work effectively across various cultures and contexts. They must collaborate with communities, as well as national and international staff and partners while ensuring that their leadership style promotes capacity-building

opportunities for national staff and partners. Evidence from leading humanitarian organizations suggests that global efforts to protect and assist people caught up in conflict and national disasters will be more effective if more women contribute to leadership roles³⁶.

Gender diversity also presents opportunities for humanitarian workers to make a meaningful impact in addressing gender inequalities and promoting women's rights. Female humanitarian workers, in particular, often bring unique insights and perspectives to their work, enabling them to better understand and respond to the specific needs of women and girls affected by crises³⁷. By actively involving women in decision-making processes and leadership roles, humanitarian organizations can foster more inclusive and effective responses that address the diverse needs of affected populations.

Gender-sensitive programming can enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of humanitarian assistance efforts. Recognizing the different roles and responsibilities of men and women within communities, as well as the intersecting factors that shape their experiences of vulnerability, allows humanitarian workers to design interventions tailored to the specific needs and priorities of different groups³⁸. For example, providing targeted support for women's economic empowerment or access to reproductive health services can contribute to the long-term resilience and well-being of communities affected by crisis³⁹.

One of the primary challenges faced by humanitarian workers is the persistence of gender-based discrimination and stereotypes, both within the aid sector itself and in the communities they serve. Women humanitarian workers often encounter barriers to leadership positions and face gender-based harassment and discrimination in the workplace⁴⁰. Similarly, male humanitarian workers may face challenges in addressing gender-specific needs and may lack the necessary training and awareness to effectively engage with gender issues. Entrenched socio-cultural gender discrimination results in an immense pool of untapped talent in many countries. Patriarchal sociocultural values and their associated gender ideologies are negatively related to women's career development, limiting career choices to those that adhere to the traditional division of labor and which do not compromise domestic responsibilities.

Many of these barriers are echoed in humanitarian, fragile and post-conflict contexts including, but not limited to, Nigeria, Niger, Mali, Senegal, Burkina Faso, and Ghana. The barriers reported in these settings include socio-cultural and economic obstacles for women exercising agency and leadership in humanitarian crises, patriarchal attitudes and norms that restrict women’s participation in public space and undermine their contribution in humanitarian setups, women’s burden of unpaid work, a lack of experience and opportunities to participate in leadership, exclusion from emergency response decision-making structures, low self-confidence, poverty and access to resources, and low levels of education and literacy. Women are more prone to and vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation during conflicts. Due to cultural norms and gender stereotypes, women’s involvement in conflict prevention and management is similarly constrained in these countries. Moreover, women are frequently left out of decision-making processes and only take part in supporting groups that are predominately male. Though progress has been slow, the government has made some attempts to encourage women’s involvement in peacebuilding⁴¹.

2.5. Gender Responsive Humanitarian Assistance

Men and women are disproportionately affected by armed conflict and humanitarian emergencies, albeit in different ways. While women generally outlive men during peacetime, this life expectancy gap narrows in times of conflict. Men are more likely to die from direct physical violence or in combat, while women suffer disproportionately from the indirect and long-term consequences of armed conflict. These include sexual violence, restricted access to healthcare, and a range of socio-economic hardships. It is well documented that during conflict, women are more likely to experience intimate partner violence, as well as become victims of sexual violence as this is often used as a weapon of war⁴². Also, over 60% of all otherwise preventable maternal deaths, 53% of all the world’s under-five deaths, and 45% of neonatal deaths occur in countries affected by humanitarian crises and fragile socio-political conditions where forced migration is also common. This growing body of evidence highlighting the disproportionate burden of female morbidity and mortality underscores the critical need to assess the role of women in leadership, particularly in shaping health research, policies,

and programmatic interventions in conflict-affected humanitarian contexts⁴³.

Many West African countries limit the integration of women in conflict prevention and management or in peacebuilding initiatives pre- and post-conflict. Due to cultural norms and gender stereotypes, women’s participation in conflict resolution is similarly constrained⁴⁴. For instance, during crises, women are particularly susceptible to sexual assault and exploitation. Numerous factors, such as patriarchal social structures, cultural norms, traditional gender roles, illiteracy, and economic constraints, contribute to this limitation and in the worst-case scenario exclusion. At the level of dispute resolution, women are most often seen as being less capable or less knowledgeable than men⁴⁵. Thus, female involvement is frequently restricted to non-decision-making tasks like providing logistical support or caring for victims.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

The study employed a structured research method using a descriptive research design. Data was collected using both quantitative and qualitative elements, drawing from primary and secondary data sources through survey questionnaires and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). The study area focused on five countries: Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, and Niger. Purposive sampling techniques were applied to determine the individuals and organizations to be interviewed focusing on those who either held or had previously held leadership positions in humanitarian organizations. The participants included women working in the humanitarian sector, especially those responsible for recruitment and hiring, diversity and inclusion officers, and senior leaders working in NGOs and advocacy groups focused on women’s rights and empowerment in West Africa. This meant that a list of individuals to be contacted and interviewed was determined beforehand, and additional respondents were identified based on information from the initially identified respondents in the five purposively selected countries.

3.2. Sample Size

In this study, the sample size determination adopted a formula used by Daniel (1977)⁴⁶. The formula is used to determine for unknown population size in a study and is given as:

$$n = \frac{n = z^2 P(1-P)}{d^2}$$

Where n = sample size,

Z = statistic for a level of confidence,

P = expected prevalence or proportion (in proportion of one; if 50%, P = 0.5), and d = precision (in proportion of one; if 6%, d = 0.06). Z statistic (Z): for the level of confidence of 95%, which is conventional, Z value is 1.96. In this study, the consultancy team present their results with 95% confidence intervals (CI). The study therefore used a sample of 76 participants.

3.3. Development of Study Tools

Field data collection was done in all the countries to provide a good representation. The field data collection tools were designed to capture the necessary information for mapping the respondents. The survey questionnaire tool, and KII guides were used to interview individuals.

3.4. Data Collection Methods

In this study, data collection methods focus on both basic secondary and primary data collection techniques, using both qualitative and quantitative data mechanisms.

3.4.1. Primary Data Collection Techniques

The primary data sources were derived from both qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative sources included individual interviews conducted through KIIs, and informal discussions. The qualitative approach was chosen because

the study employed inductive reasoning, given its descriptive nature. Participants were selected from the pool of HAWA Alumni and collaborators. A multi-stage selection approach was adopted to choose the sampled respondents. The study targeted men and women from various West African countries who have been employed in professional humanitarian assistance representing different stages of career progression (entry-level, mid-level, and senior positions). Including men alongside women allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the gender dynamics within the sector, providing insights into how both genders perceive and experience the barriers and drivers that affect women’s entry into and advancement within humanitarian careers. A total of 7 key informants participated in the study. Interviews were conducted using semi-structured interview guides that focused on key themes such as barriers to entry, career progression, mentorship, work-life balance, and organizational culture. Interviews were held in person or via video conferencing platforms, depending on the location and availability of the participants. Quantitative data was gathered through survey questionnaires (n=69) using Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI). The survey targeted a larger, diverse sample of respondents across West African countries, including both those currently working in humanitarian assistance and those with prior experience in the sector, as well as individuals from various leadership levels, sectors, and roles related to humanitarian operations and gender empowerment. Respondents were interviewed using a structured questionnaire, programmed in a mobile-based data collection system (Kobo Collect), and segmented across themes as outlined in the study. The data was subsequently downloaded for analysis by the study team.

3.4.2. Secondary Data Collection Techniques

A desk review, including data from various secondary sources, continuously remained a part of this study. The literature review entailed examining documents on gender and intersectionality, including the drivers and impediments for women from West Africa to enter professional humanitarian assistance and advance their careers in international contexts, as well as the gender component strategy of the HAWA Project. The literature review relied on various sources, including relevant national policies and plans on gender inclusion in humanitarian contexts, relevant project documents signed by KAIPTC and ACP, and materials such as context analyses, studies on community structures and socio-political

tical dynamics, peer-reviewed journal articles, papers, and .grey literature’ on the subject. The study also reviewed reports and literature from other development agencies engaged in humanitarian work and gender inclusivity.

3.5. Data Entry and Analysis

Preliminary field pre-analysis was undertaken to ensure that the data captured is accurate, well organized, complete, and consistent with the intent of the research. After data entry, the data was ‘cleaned’, collated, tabulated, organized for analysis and presented in various descriptive formats.

Quantitative data from the survey questionnaires was downloaded from KOBO Collect and saved in MS Excel format, then coded in SPSS for analysis. The information was analyzed for indicators related to the study objectives in a statistically sound and robust manner. Analysis protocols, a clean copy of the finalized data set, and a data dictionary were provided for future report replication and monitoring purposes.

Qualitative data was transcribed, and the transcripts were managed in QSR NVivo using a coding framework developed by the consulting team. The coding framework was created based on several sources: evaluation objectives, questions, data collection themes, and findings from the review of documentation. Data from interview transcripts and field notes obtained through KIIs were analyzed using content and thematic analysis. Triangulation was applied across the different data sets. Rigorous data analysis and reporting were pivotal to ensure quality, comprehensiveness, and the overall outcomes of the study.

3.6. Ethical Standards and Considerations

This study adhered to rigorous ethical standards to ensure the protection and respect of all participants involved. Prior to data collection, informed consent was sought from all participants. Each participant was provided with detailed information about the study’s purpose, their role, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Privacy and confidentiality were paramount; all personal data were anonymized, and identifying information was securely stored and only accessible to

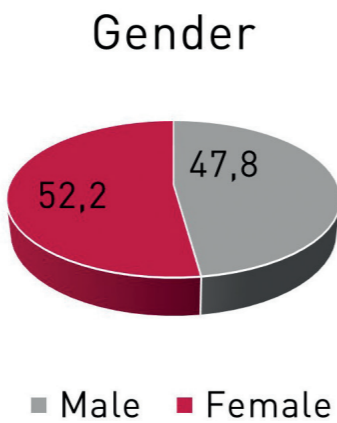
the research team. Special attention was given to the sensitive nature of discussions around gender, career barriers, and personal experiences, with participants encouraged to share only what they felt comfortable disclosing. Additionally, the study ensured cultural sensitivity, recognizing the diverse backgrounds of women in West Africa, and employed culturally appropriate communication and data collection methods.

4. STUDY RESULTS

This section expatiates on the findings of the study. The analysis is focused on the responses of both the questionnaires as well as the key informant interviews. Hence, this section aims to meet the objectives of the study (see section 1.3).

4.1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

4.1.1. Gender Distribution

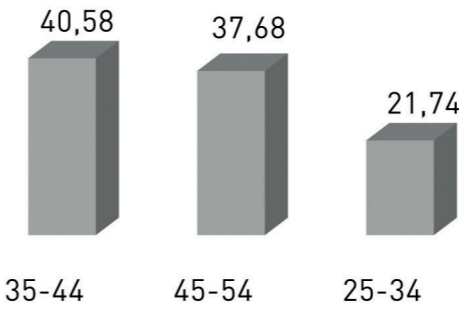


The gender distribution of the respondents shows a slight majority of female participants (52.2%) compared to male participants (47.8%).

4.1.2. Age Distribution

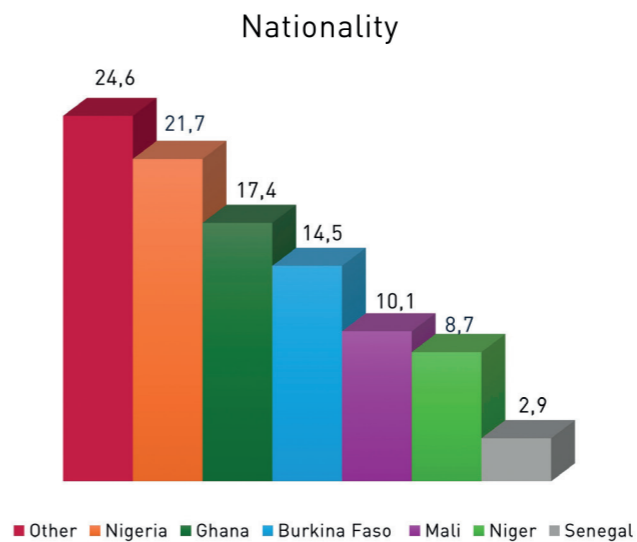
The age distribution of the respondents indicates that the largest group falls within the 35-44 age range, accounting for 40.58% of the sample. This is followed closely by the 45-54 age group, which represents 37.68% of respondents.

Age Distribution



The 25-34 age group comprises 21.74% of the sample. This distribution suggests that a significant proportion of the respondents are mid-career professionals. The relatively lower representation of younger professionals (25-34) may indicate challenges in attracting or retaining younger individuals in this sector, or it could reflect the typical career trajectory where individuals enter the humanitarian field after gaining initial experience in other roles.

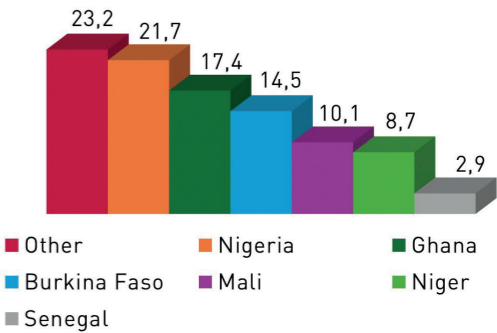
4.1.3. Nationality and Country of Work



The respondents represent a diverse range of nationalities, with the largest group from one country being from Nigeria (21.7%), followed by respondents from Ghana (17.4%), and Burkina Faso (14.5%). Other countries such as Mali (10.1%), Niger (8.7%), and Senegal (2.9%) are also represented. Additionally, a significant portion (24.6%) of respondents is from

other countries including Gambia, Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, Gambia, Liberia, and Benin. This diversity in nationality underscores the varied perspectives and experiences of humanitarian workers across different West African countries, providing a rich dataset for examining regional differences and commonalities in the barriers and enablers for women in humanitarian assistance careers.

Country of Work

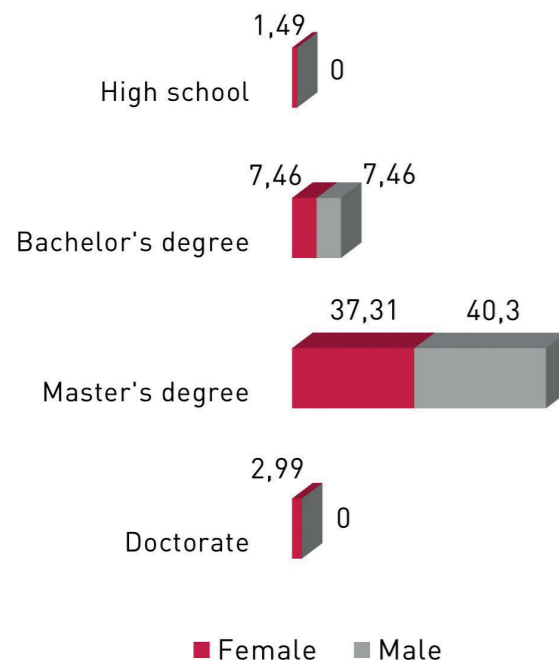


The distribution of respondents’ countries of work largely mirrors their nationalities, with the largest number of respondents working in Nigeria (21.7%), followed by Ghana (17.4%), and Burkina Faso (14.5%). Other significant work locations include Mali (10.1%), Niger (8.7%), and Senegal (2.9%), with a notable portion (23.2%) working in other countries including Gambia, Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, Gambia, Liberia, and Benin. The inclusion of respondents working in the whole of the West African region also enhances the study’s capacity to generalize findings across national contexts within West Africa.

4.1.4. Education Level

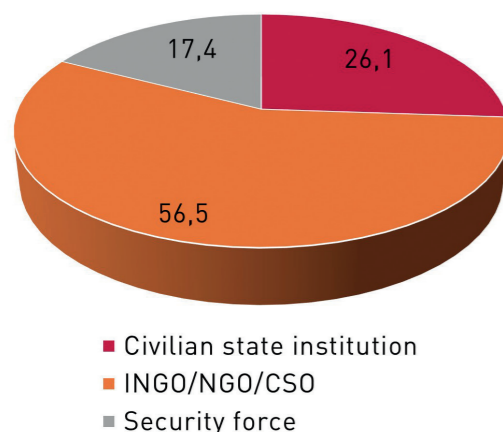
The findings on the highest level of education attained by male and female respondents reveal a notable distribution across educational qualifications, with both similarities and differences between genders. Among both female and male participants, the majority hold a Master’s degree, with 37.31% of women and 40.3% of men reporting this qualification. This suggests that a significant portion of individuals in humanitarian work have pursued advanced academic training, which is often a prerequisite for career advancement within the sector. The relatively close percentages between men and women with Master’s degrees also indicate that both genders have made similar investments in higher edu-

Level of Education



cation as a pathway to professional growth. The proportion of respondents with a Bachelor's degree is equal for both genders, with 7.46% for both men and women. A key point of divergence is in the attainment of Doctorate degrees. While 2.99% of female respondents hold a Doctorate, none of the male respondents reported having achieved this level of education. Additionally, 1.49% of women reported having only completed high school as their highest level of education, a figure not mirrored among male respondents.

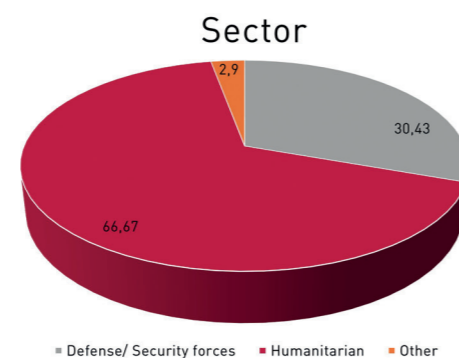
Type of Organization



4.1.5. Type of Organization

The majority of respondents work in INGO/NGO/CSO organizations, comprising 56.5% of the sample. Those working in civilian state institutions account for 26.1%, while 17.4% are in security forces. This distribution highlights the diverse representation across humanitarian and governmental sectors and the significant role of NGOs in the humanitarian sector.

4.1.6. Sector



The majority of respondents work in the humanitarian sector, accounting for 66.67% of the sample. Those in defense/security forces make up 30.43%, and 2.9% are in other sectors (government institutions). This indicates a strong focus on humanitarian activities among the respondents, with a significant portion also involved in development and security-related work.

4.2. Underrepresentation of Women in Decision-Making Roles

The study reported that while the humanitarian sector is increasingly working towards improving gender representation in decision-making roles, these efforts often focus on gender and disability as the most visible areas of disparity. Consequently, more women are being involved in decision-making positions, but they predominantly occupy subordinate or second-in-command roles rather than top leadership positions. This trend highlights a persistent gap in achieving true gender equity at the highest levels of decision-making, suggesting that while progress is being made, significant barriers still hinder women from attaining top leadership roles within the sector.

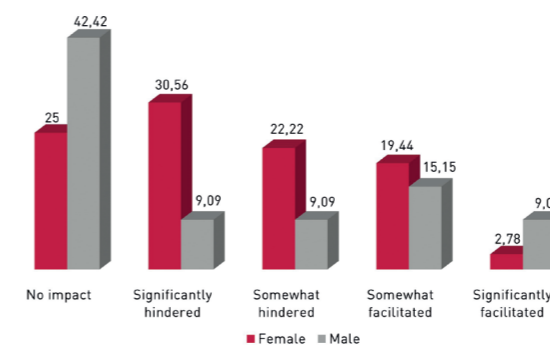
The underrepresentation of women is often fueled by a combination of cultural norms, restricted access to education and professional development, and systemic biases that persistently obstruct their advancement into leadership roles. Cultural expectations often place women in roles that are perceived as less authoritative or decision-oriented, thereby limiting their participation in leadership. Additionally, systemic biases within organizational structures and practices also play a significant role, often resulting in women being overlooked for promotions or leadership opportunities.

“The level of representation of women in decision-making roles is still relatively low. Cultural norms and professional development opportunities, and systemic biases contribute to this underrepresentation.” (Interviewee)

“There are usually many women candidates showing interest in the jobs. However, the inability to travel and the roles surrounding women in the industry makes the HR professionals already have an unregistered bias against women during hiring knowing the job expectations. This is mainly encountered where a role is field based and a lot of travel and movement is expected.” (Interviewee)

4.3. Impact of Gender on Career Progression

To what extent do you feel that your gender has impacted your career progression in humanitarian assistance?

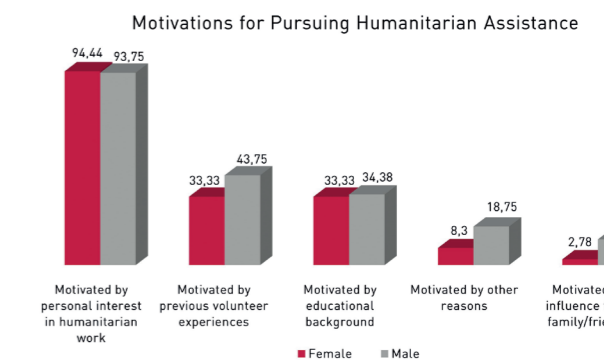


Gender impacts career progression differently for males and females in the humanitarian sector. For females, gender is seen as significantly hindering career progression by 30.6%, whereas only 9.1% of males feel similarly. Conversely, 24.2% of males feel that their gender significantly facilitates their

career progression, compared to only 2.78% of females. This highlights the gender disparities in career advancement within the sector.

4.4. The Drivers for Pursuing a Career in Humanitarian Assistance

4.4.1. Motivations for Pursuing Humanitarian Assistance



The findings on motivations for pursuing a career in humanitarian assistance reveal mainly similarities among both genders, and some slight distinctions in the factors that influence career choices in this sector. A significant portion of both male and female respondents cited personal interest in humanitarian work as their primary motivation, with 94.44% of women and 93.75% of men selecting this factor. This highlights a shared intrinsic drive among professionals in the field, where passion for making a positive impact serves as a strong motivator across genders. Previous volunteer experiences also emerged as a notable influence, with a slightly higher percentage of men (43.75%) than women (33.33%) being motivated by such experiences. This may suggest that men are more likely to have had early exposure to humanitarian work through volunteering, which could have reinforced their decision to pursue careers in this field.

Conversely, educational background played a relatively balanced role in motivating both women (33.33%) and men (34.38%), indicating that formal education in relevant fields like development studies, or international relations contributes equally to career choices in humanitarian assistance across genders. The relatively lower percentage of respondents citing education as a motivator may reflect a gap between academic training and practical engagement in the field. This points to the potential for educational institutions to strengthen their curricula and partnerships with humani-

tarian organizations, thereby providing students with more direct pathways into the sector.

A gender difference emerged in the influence of family and friends. While only 2.78% of women reported being motivated by this factor, 12.5% of men did. This suggests that men may be more likely to rely on social networks when deciding to enter humanitarian work, while women may place less emphasis on such external influences. Finally, the category of other reasons including the loss of close family members, a lack of humanitarian assistance in some regions and persistent conflicts reflected a higher proportion of men (18.75%) compared to women (8.33%).

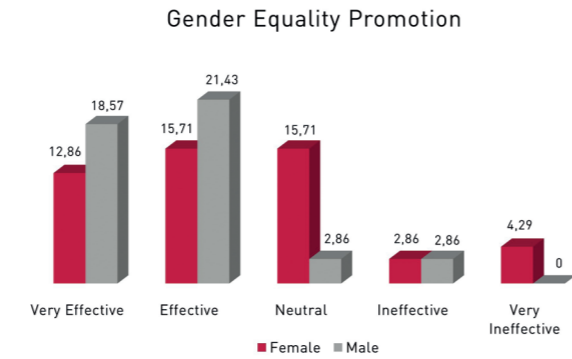
4.4.2. Key Opportunities and Resources for Overcoming Structural Barriers



The question on beneficial opportunities and resources for overcoming structural barriers in pursuing a career in humanitarian assistance reveal significant insights into the dynamics of support available to female respondents. Non-governmental organization (NGO) initiatives are seen as the most beneficial opportunities, accounting for 31% of responses. Scholarships or financial aid also play a significant role, cited by 28.3%. Professional networks and associations are beneficial for 22.1% of respondents, and government programs for 15%. Other opportunities account for 3.5%. Overall, these findings suggest that a combination of financial support, professional networking, and NGO-driven initiatives constitute key support systems in the professional

journey of individuals in the humanitarian sector. These enablers not only provide essential resources and opportunities but also foster an environment where career advancement is more accessible to those committed to making a difference in humanitarian work.

4.4.3. Institutional Policies, Practices, and HR



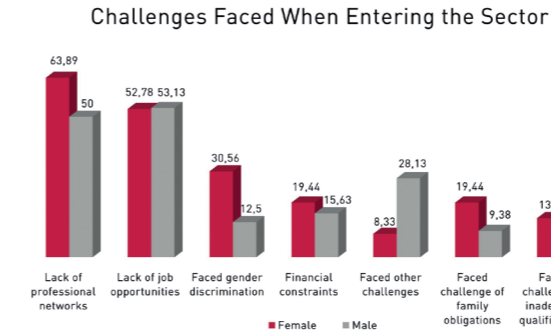
The findings regarding respondents' perceptions of their organization's efforts to promote gender equality in hiring and career advancement reveal important insights into the current state of gender equity within the workplace. The data indicates that a higher percentage of male respondents rated their organizations as „effective“ (21.43%) and „very effective“ (18.57%) in promoting gender equality compared to female respondents, who rated their organizations as „effective“ (15.71%) and „very effective“ (12.86%).

Interestingly, a notable proportion of female respondents (15.71%) expressed a neutral stance, which may reflect ambivalence or uncertainty regarding the effectiveness of their organization's gender equality initiatives. This neutrality is a reason for concern, as it suggests that women may not feel adequately informed or confident about the measures being taken to support their advancement. By contrast, only a small percentage of male respondents (2.86%) reported a neutral opinion, indicating greater clarity or confidence in their organizations' efforts from their perspective. Moreover, the data shows that a minimal number of respondents from both genders rated their organizations as „ineffective“ (2.86%) or „very ineffective“ (4.29% of females). This suggests that while there is some recognition of ongoing challenges, there may also be a reluctance to openly acknowledge shortcomings in gender equality initiatives.

Overall, these findings highlight a disparity in perceptions between male and female respondents regarding organizational efforts to promote gender equality. The presence of these dissenting views underscores the need for organizations to continuously evaluate and refine their gender equality strategies. This could involve conducting regular feedback sessions, increasing transparency in hiring and promotion processes, and providing more robust support for women's career advancement, especially in leadership positions.

4.5. The Impediments Faced in Career Progression within International Contexts

4.5.1. Challenges Faced When Entering the Sector

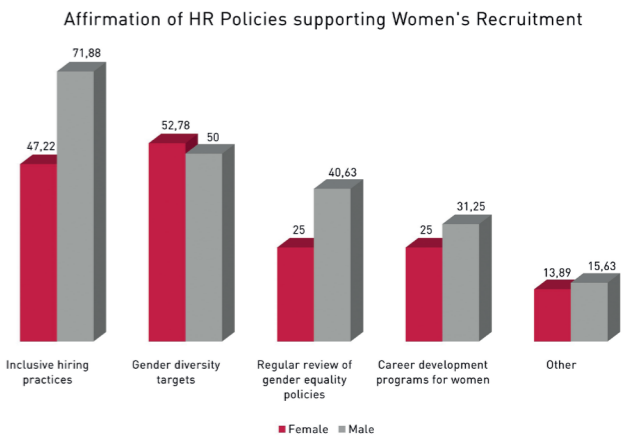


The data highlights several key challenges faced by individuals seeking to enter the humanitarian sector, with lack of professional networks and job opportunities emerging as the most prominent barriers. Female respondents consistently reported higher incidences of most challenges compared to their male counterparts, highlighting the distinct obstacles women face in accessing professional opportunities in the sector. A lack of professional networks was the most frequently cited challenge for both genders, with 63.89% of female respondents and 50% of male respondents identifying it as a barrier. The fact that more women reported this issue suggests that they may have fewer opportunities to connect with key stakeholders, mentors, or peers who can support their career advancement. This aligns with broader research indicating that women often have less access to networking opportunities, which are crucial for securing jobs and advancing in male-dominated fields like humanitarian assistance⁴⁷.

Gender discrimination was another notable challenge, re-

ported by 30.56% of female respondents compared to only 12.5% of male respondents. This significant gap highlights the ongoing gender biases women face in entering and progressing within the humanitarian sector. The presence of gender discrimination as a barrier points to structural inequities that organizations must address to create a more inclusive and equitable working environment. Lack of job opportunities was cited at similar levels by both genders (52.78% for females and 53.13% for males), indicating that this challenge is experienced broadly across the sector, regardless of gender. Financial constraints and family obligations were also more frequently reported by female respondents (19.44% for both) compared to male respondents (15.63% and 9.38%, respectively). Interestingly, more male respondents (28.13%) cited „other“ challenges such as ethnicity compared to female respondents (8.33%) who cited cultural barriers, personal health issues, and lack of awareness about the sector.

4.5.2. Perceptions of HR Policies Supporting Women's Recruitment and Career Advancement



The findings regarding the presence of specific HR policies to support women's recruitment and career advancement in organizations show interesting variations between male and female respondents' perceptions. When asked about inclusive hiring practices, a higher percentage of male respondents (71.88%) acknowledged the existence of such policies compared to female respondents (47.22%). This disparity may suggest that men are either more aware of these practices or perceive their implementation more favorably, while women may feel that inclusive hiring measures are either lacking or not communicated or enforced as effectively within their organizations.

Regarding gender diversity targets (hiring quotas, board gender balance and promotion targets), both female (52.78%) and male respondents (50%) recognized the presence of such targets.

The results also show that both men and women reported low percentages for the regular review of gender equality policies (25% of women and 40.63% of men). This suggests that, while there may be some effort to evaluate these policies, they are not a prominent feature in many organizations. For career development programs for women, both genders reported low awareness or presence, with 25% of female respondents and 31.25% of male respondents indicating their availability. These programs, which may include mentorship, leadership training, and skill development workshops, are designed to support women in overcoming structural and cultural barriers to career progression. The low numbers highlight a broader challenge within organizations to implement or effectively promote tailored programs that actively support women’s career advancement. Finally, the „Other” category, with a 13.89% for women and 15.63 for men included organizational culture, work-life balance support, and access to professional networks. The findings suggest that while some organizations have policies in place to support women’s recruitment and career advancement, the visibility, implementation, and perceived effectiveness of these policies vary between men and women.

4.5.3. Sexual Advances as a Pathway to Promotion

The findings highlight a troubling practice within humanitarian organizations where sexual advances are often used as a means for career advancement. This issue was highlighted by five key informants, who reported that female workers, in particular, face pressure from superiors to engage in sexual relationships in exchange for promotions or favorable assignments. This coercive environment undermines meritocracy, perpetuates gender inequality, and creates a toxic work culture. The normalization of such behavior not only hinders the professional growth of women but also damages the credibility of humanitarian missions. Addressing this issue is crucial for cultivating an inclusive and equitable workplace where advancement is based on competence, not coercion.

“I’ve witnessed colleagues being pressured into compromising situations where sexual favors are implied as a requirement for promotion. It’s disheartening and demoralizing, knowing that advancement can be tied to exploitation rather than merit.” (Interviewee)

4.5.4. Financial Barriers to Inclusive Support

The participants highlighted that the inclusion of women in humanitarian work mostly necessitates additional investments in infrastructure and support systems. Key areas requiring attention include the provision of breastfeeding friendly areas due to societal discomfort with breastfeeding in public or work settings in certain cultural contexts, flexible work arrangements, and childcare services. These measures are essential to accommodate the unique needs of women, particularly those with young children, and to foster a more inclusive and supportive work environment. Without such investments, women’s participation in the sector remains limited, reinforcing existing gender disparities.

“Investing in necessary infrastructure, such as nursing areas and childcare services, represents an additional expense that many organizations fear, yet without these supports, the barriers for women entering and thriving in humanitarian work remain insurmountable.” (Interviewee)

4.5.5. Familial Responsibilities and Geographical Limitations

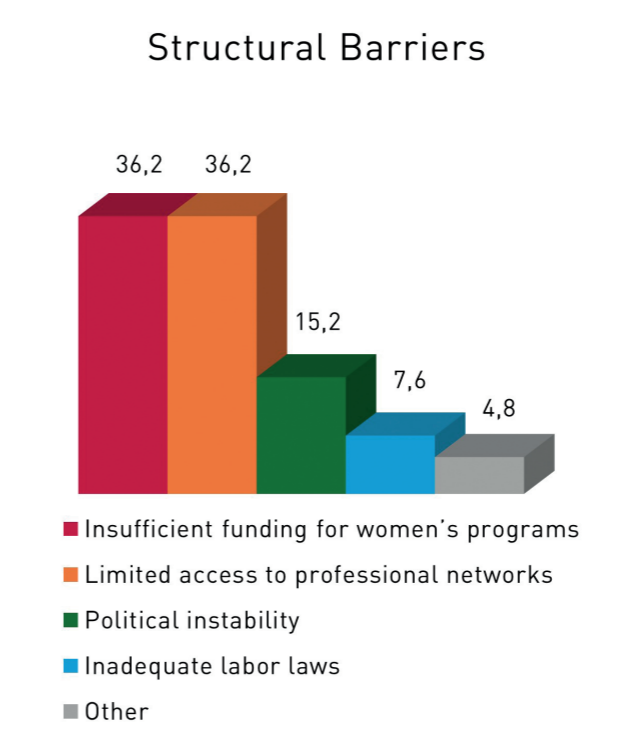
The findings indicate that gender roles and geographical barriers significantly limit the professional opportunities available to women in humanitarian work. For instance, many women are unable to pursue international assignments due to familial responsibilities, such as being a wife or mother. These roles restrict their ability to accept positions that require extended absences from their home country. Consequently, long-term missions, which could offer substantial professional growth, are often not considered. This situation underscores the need for flexible work arrangements and support systems, including fostering cultural acceptance of women’s participation in humanitarian work beyond traditional roles. Encouraging communities and organizations to recognize and value women’s professional contributions can help challenge norms that confine women to domestic

or caregiving roles, thus enabling their participation and advancement in the sector.

“I have colleagues who will not leave their country of nationality because they are married with children and therefore their roles as a wife and mother do not allow them to take a position in another country if they are going to be away longer than a week.” (Interviewee)

“The other being geographical barriers especially where there is conflict, there is tendencies for institutions to open up these positions to male colleagues and not female colleagues due to fright and flight expectations. These becomes a barrier to employment for some of the female candidates.” (Interviewee)

4.5.7. Structural Barriers Against Women’s Career Advancement.



The most significant structural barriers identified are insufficient funding for women’s programs and limited access to professional networks, each accounting for 36.2% of responses. Political instability is also a notable barrier, affecting 15.2%. Inadequate labor laws are a challenge for 7.6%, and other barriers account for 4.8% of the responses. The category of “other barriers” indicates that there are additio-

nal challenges affecting career progression among women in the humanitarian sector. Klls reported that these barriers include organizational culture issues, logistical challenges, or sector-specific constraints that were not captured in the primary categories. Addressing these diverse barriers requires a comprehensive understanding of the unique contexts and needs of different regions and organizations.

The **lack of adequate funding for women’s programs** is a major structural barrier. Financial constraints can severely limit the scope and effectiveness of initiatives designed to support women’s career development, leadership training, and gender equality efforts. Without sufficient funding, organizations may struggle to implement and sustain programs that address the unique needs and challenges faced by women in the sector. This limitation not only affects the development of women’s professional skills but also hampers the creation of a supportive infrastructure that promotes their advancement.

Professional networks are crucial for career development, providing opportunities for mentorship, collaboration, and information sharing. The absence of robust networks can restrict women’s ability to connect with key stakeholders, access job opportunities, and gain visibility in the sector. To address this issue, there is a need for targeted efforts to build and expand professional networks that are inclusive and accessible to women.

Also, **political** instability presents a notable challenge, particularly in regions where humanitarian work is heavily influenced by the political environment. Political instability can disrupt program implementation, create uncertainty, and limit resources available for gender-focused initiatives. This instability often exacerbates existing gender disparities, making it more difficult to achieve and sustain progress toward gender equality. Moreover, inadequate labor laws contribute to the structural barriers facing women in the humanitarian sector. Weak or insufficient labor protections can lead to issues such as lack of job security, inadequate parental leave, and unequal pay. These legal shortcomings undermine efforts to create a fair and supportive work environment, impacting women’s ability to advance in their careers and achieve work-life balance.

4.5.8. Empowerment and Organizational Support to Voice Concerns

The findings reveal a mixed experience among respondents regarding empowerment to voice concerns within their organizations. While some participants noted that their organizations provided platforms for open dialogue and encouraged women to express their concerns, others reported a lack of concrete support structures or fear of retaliation. The creation of a safe environment for women to thrive varied significantly across organizations, with some offering comprehensive policies and practices, while others lacked the necessary mechanisms to ensure women’s voices were heard and respected. Overall, organizational culture played a crucial role in determining the extent of empowerment experienced by women.



The findings regarding the empowerment of employees to voice concerns and create the ion of a safe environment for women within organizations reveal notable insights into organizational dynamics and gender inclusivity. 19.44% of female respondents and 43.75% of male respondents reported feeling very much empowered to voice their concerns. This higher percentage among males might indicate a perceived or actual greater support for open dialogue within organizational structures, potentially reflecting deeper cultural norms or leadership attitudes. A significant proportion of both female and male respondents indicated some level of empowerment, with 47.22% of females and 46.89% of males stating they are empowered to voice concerns to some extent. This suggests a foundational level of support for open communication, yet also indicates room for improvement in fully enabling employees to speak out effectively.

However, there is some unease about the responses indicating limited empowerment, with 19.44% of females and 9.38% of males feeling that they are not really empowered to voice concerns, and 8.33% of females indicating they are not empowered at all. These figures underscore existing challenges in creating a safe and supportive environment for women to thrive within these organizations. The lower percentages among males in these categories may suggest a more favorable environment for open dialogue from their perspective, though the overall presence of any respondents feeling inadequately empowered indicates a need for enhanced support mechanisms. Factors contributing to these gaps could include insufficient training, lack of visibility or communication about available resources, or inadequate responses to reported issues. One participant from the KIIs shared,

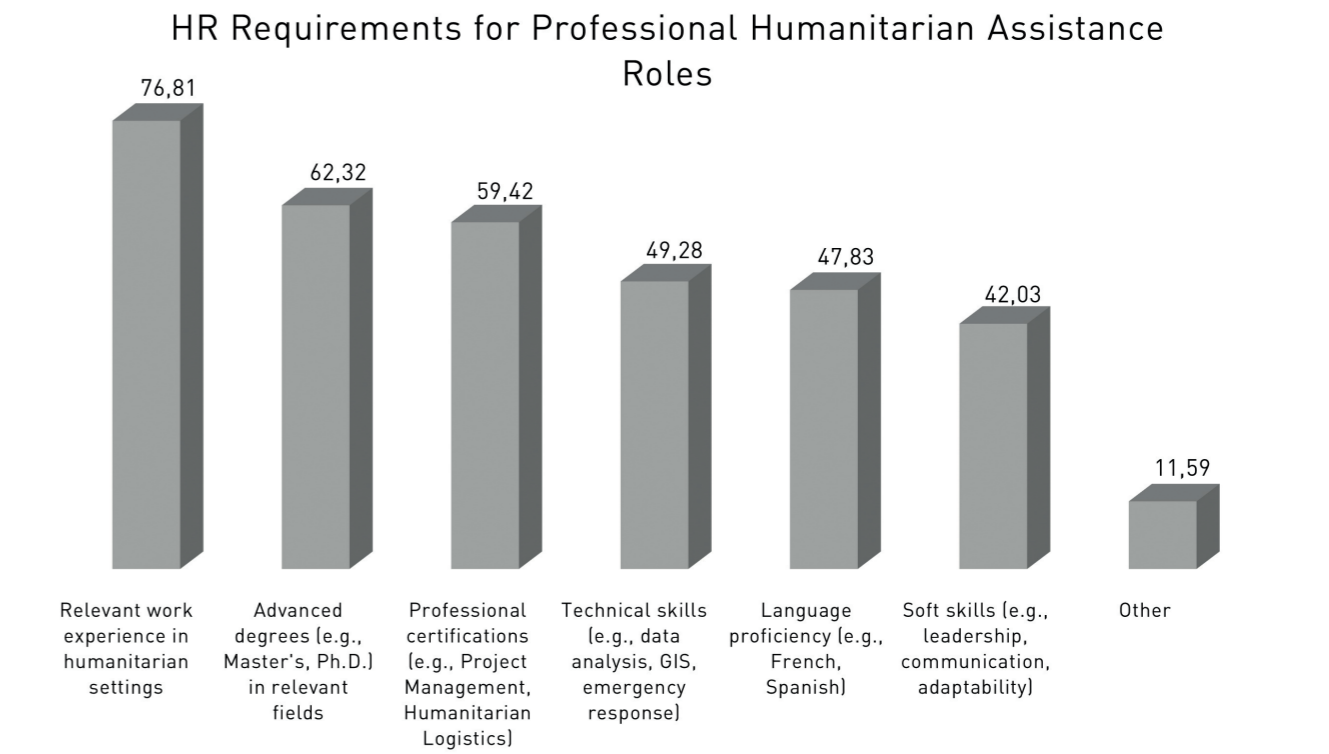
„My organization does encourage us to speak out, but when it comes to taking action, there’s often little follow-through, which makes me hesitant to raise concerns.“ (Interviewee)

Conversely, another respondent stated,

„We have regular forums where women’s issues are discussed openly, and I feel confident that my voice is heard and respected.“ (Interviewee)

The substantial proportion of respondents who feel empowered highlights the effectiveness of organizational policies and practices that support advocacy and the creation of safe environments for women. Such empowerment as reported by key informants stems from various factors, including leadership support, clear anti-harassment policies, and active encouragement of employee voices. Organizations that successfully foster this sense of empowerment are likely to benefit from a more engaged and proactive workforce, contributing to a safer and more equitable workplace culture.

Addressing these gaps requires a focused effort to ensure that all employees feel genuinely supported. This might involve enhancing training programs on advocacy and safety, improving communication about resources and support systems, and actively soliciting and acting upon feedback from employees who feel less empowered. Ensuring that empowerment is uniformly experienced across the organization is crucial for creating a truly inclusive and safe work environment.



4.6. HR Requirements and Qualifications to enter the Sector

4.6.1. HR Requirements

The most critical HR requirements for professional humanitarian assistance roles are relevant work experience in humanitarian settings (76.81%) and advanced degrees in relevant fields (62.32%). Professional certifications and technical skills are also highly valued, accounting for 59.42% and 49.28% of responses, respectively. Language proficiency (47.83%) and soft skills (42.03%) are essential but slightly less prioritized. These results indicate a strong emphasis on experience, education, and specialized skills for roles in the humanitarian sector.

4.6.2. HR Requirements as Barriers

Key informants noted that some of the HR requirements for entering the humanitarian sector were stringent, particularly the emphasis on holding a first degree and, in some cases, a second degree. This presents a significant barrier for many women in West Africa, where access to higher education remains limited. While women in the study indicated

high levels of education—often surpassing their male counterparts—this reflects a selective sample within the humanitarian field, as broader statistics show that many women in the region typically hold only certificates or diplomas due to systemic barriers, including economic constraints, social expectations, and early marriage, which often prevent them from pursuing higher education. For instance, girls’ primary school enrollment has improved, but the transition to secondary education remains a challenge, with only about 40% of girls enrolling compared to approximately 60% of boys in countries like Burkina Faso. Furthermore, women constitute only around 30% of university seats in many West African countries, highlighting a stark gender gap in higher education.⁴⁸

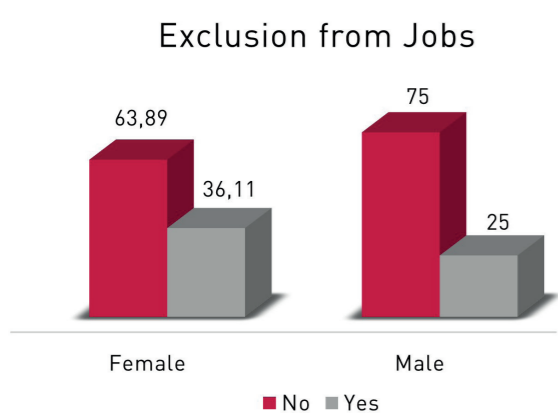
As a result, the emphasis on academic qualifications often excludes those with the practical skills, dedication, and personal qualities essential for humanitarian work.

“The requirement for a first degree, and in some cases a second degree, to secure a role is often punitive for certificate and diploma holders who may possess the necessary skills, drive, and personality suited for humanitarian assistance roles.” (Interviewee)

This focus on higher education marginalizes women who, despite lacking formal degrees, could excel in humanitarian roles due to their experience and adaptability. It limits the pool of candidates and overlooks the diverse competencies that are crucial for effective humanitarian assistance. Consequently, recruitment processes risk becoming overly rigid, missing out on individuals whose capabilities and field experience may align more closely with the sector’s demands than conventional academic expectations.

Recognizing and valuing non-formal education and lived experience could create entry-level opportunities for women in West Africa, allowing them to advance their careers through hands-on training as first responders. This approach would not only expand access but also create pathways for women to develop their skills and expertise within the humanitarian sector, fostering a more inclusive workforce that reflects the communities they serve.

4.6.3. Exclusion from Job Opportunities



A total of 69 respondents shared their experiences regarding exclusion from job opportunities in the humanitarian sector due to not meeting specific qualifications. Among the respondents, a significant portion reported not experiencing such exclusion—64% of females and 75% of males. However, 36% of females and 25% of males indicated they had faced exclusion, citing various reasons for their experiences. A common theme among those who reported exclusion was language barriers. Many respondents specifically mentioned French as a significant obstacle, with remarks such as „French barrier“ and „French limited me.“ Additionally, issues related to English proficiency were frequently noted, with statements like „The problem linked to mastery of English

often leads to blockage“ and „Yes, the English language has been a barrier to me in recruitment processes on several occasions. I’m not fluent in English.“

These findings underscore the pressing need for bilingual credentials in the humanitarian sector. Proficiency in multiple languages is increasingly essential in a field that operates in diverse and multilingual contexts. However, the lack of language skills can severely limit candidates’ opportunities and hinder their ability to compete effectively for roles.

Findings from qualitative interviews indicated that gender discrimination was also a barrier in employment as highlighted below:

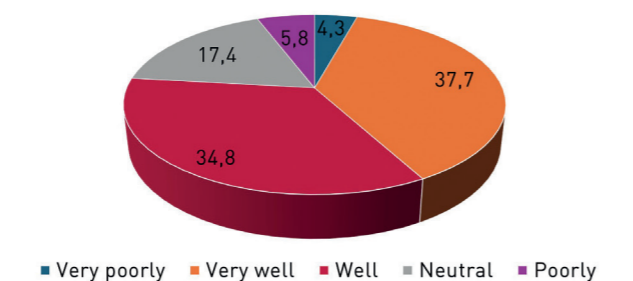
“I was told that because I am a woman, the position requires time and dedication, even though I am not married or pregnant, it’s still an issue.” (Interviewee)

Additionally, some respondents pointed to the lack of specific qualifications, such as advanced degrees or certifications, with comments like „Not having a degree in project management which has been demanded“ and „Yes, I didn’t have the specific degree in project management required.“

While the majority of respondents do not perceive qualification-related exclusion as a major barrier, the experiences of those who do highlight the importance of language accessibility in recruitment processes. Organizations can better support a diverse range of candidates by implementing practical measures such as providing language support during interviews and developing clear, concise job descriptions that prioritize essential qualifications over specific degrees.

4.6.4. Perception of Qualification Requirements

How do qualification requirements reflect the actual needs of the job in the humanitarian sector?



The majority of respondents (72.5%) believe that the qualification requirements for jobs in the humanitarian sector align well (34.8%) or very well (37.7%) with the actual needs of the job. However, a notable portion remains neutral (17.4%), and a smaller percentage feels that the requirements reflect the job needs poorly (5.8%) or very poorly (4.3%). This indicates that while most respondents find the qualifications appropriate, there is room for some improvements to better match job requirements.

“From the perspective of recruitment and selection, HR practitioners are then reduced to working more on a college qualification set up as opposed to individuals with passion and drive to work in the industry.” (Interviewee)

While the majority of respondents find that job qualification requirements align well with actual job needs, there is a portion of the workforce that perceives room for improvement. Addressing the concerns of those who find the alignment lacking, and continuously reviewing and updating qualification standards, will help ensure that the humanitarian sector remains responsive to the needs of both job roles and candidates. This approach will contribute to a more effective and inclusive workforce, ultimately enhancing the sector’s ability to meet its mission and objectives.

Implications for Improvement

To address these concerns, organizations might consider conducting regular reviews of qualification criteria to ensure they accurately reflect the evolving needs of the sector. Engaging with current employees and stakeholders to gather feedback on the effectiveness and relevance of qualification requirements can help identify gaps and opportunities for adjustment.

4.6.5. Disparity in Sexual Harassment Protection

The findings from the KIs reveal a critical gap in sexual harassment policies within humanitarian contexts. While these policies effectively safeguard civilians, they often fail to extend the same level of protection to humanitarian workers. This disparity stems from the prioritization of the community members and a lack of robust mechanisms addressing the unique challenges faced by aid workers. As a result, humanitarian personnel, particularly women, are left vulnerable

to harassment, with limited recourse and support. The findings underscore the need for comprehensive policies that equally protect both civilian population affected by the crisis and humanitarian workers, ensuring a safe and equitable working environment for all.

„While sexual harassment policies are designed to protect civilians, the same level of safeguarding is often not extended to humanitarian workers, leaving them vulnerable and inadequately supported in the face of harassment.“ (Interviewee)

4.7. Enhancing Diversity and Inclusion in the Humanitarian Sector

The section focuses on several areas that are vital to fostering an inclusive environment for women. These include the role of HR policies designed to support women’s recruitment, retention, and advancement. It also delves into gender-specific challenges, and the importance of addressing societal barriers that may restrict women’s access to opportunities in humanitarian work.

4.7.1. HR Policies Supporting Women

Supporting HR policies are crucial for women in humanitarian field roles, enabling them to balance their professional and personal lives more effectively. For instance, data from one of the KIs found that allowing women to telework when they return to their home location provides them with the flexibility to spend quality time with their families while maintaining their professional responsibilities.

“Supporting policies like teleworking so that women holding field roles are able to telework when they are back in their location to be able to spend more time with their families. Also giving days away tied to field work that are taken immediately after field work to be able to reconnect with their families.” (Interviewee)

Inclusive hiring practices are critical for ensuring that recruitment processes are fair and equitable. By actively seeking to reduce biases and broaden the pool of candidates, organizations can create opportunities for a more diverse range of applicants. This approach not only supports gender equality but also enhances the overall talent pool by valuing

diverse perspectives and experiences. The prominence of inclusive hiring practices among respondents suggests that organizations are prioritizing these efforts to build a more diverse and representative workforce.

Gender diversity targets play a crucial role in driving organizational commitment to achieving gender balance. These targets provide clear benchmarks and incentives for organizations to focus on improving gender representation. By setting and pursuing specific diversity goals, organizations can create a more structured approach to addressing gender imbalances and fostering a more inclusive work environment. The significant attention to gender diversity targets indicates a proactive stance towards achieving gender parity within the sector.

Career development programs for women typically include initiatives such as mentorship, leadership training, and skills development workshops. Although less frequently highlighted than inclusive hiring practices and diversity targets, career development programs are essential for helping women navigate their career paths and overcome barriers to advancement. The moderate emphasis on these programs suggests that while they are valued, there is potential for increased focus and resources to further support women's career growth.

Lastly, **regular reviews of gender equality policies** are crucial for ensuring that policies remain effective and relevant. Ongoing assessment allows organizations to address emerging issues, track progress, and make necessary adjustments to improve gender equality. This practice contributes to maintaining a dynamic and responsive approach to gender issues, though it appears to be somewhat less emphasized compared to hiring practices and diversity targets.

While these policies collectively support gender equality, there is an opportunity to enhance efforts in career development and policy review to provide more comprehensive support for women. By continuing to prioritize and strengthen these areas, organizations can further advance gender equality and create a more inclusive and supportive environment for women in the sector.

Areas for Further Support

Despite the generally positive response, there remains a

smaller portion of respondents who feel less empowered to promote safeguarding strategies. This suggests that there are gaps in how safeguarding initiatives are communicated, supported, or implemented across the organization. To address these gaps, organizations should focus on additional support and empowerment for all employees. This could include targeted training programs, clearer communication about safeguarding roles and responsibilities, and mechanisms for providing feedback and support. Ensuring that all employees feel equipped and encouraged to participate in safeguarding efforts is crucial for maximizing the impact of these strategies and fostering a comprehensive culture of safety and respect.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusion

The findings from this study highlight the complexities and challenges faced by women from West Africa in entering and advancing their careers in the humanitarian sector. The study reveals that while there are significant drivers encouraging women to pursue careers in humanitarian assistance, substantial barriers still impede their progression, particularly in international contexts. One of the primary drivers identified is the strong personal interest that women have in humanitarian work, with many respondents motivated by a desire to make a meaningful impact. Educational background and previous volunteer experiences also play crucial roles in inspiring women to enter the sector. However, these drivers are often countered by significant impediments, such as a lack of professional networks, gender discrimination, and financial constraints. These challenges are compounded by institutional barriers, including insufficient funding for women's programs and limited access to professional networks, which further hinder the career advancement of women in this sector. The troubling practice of sexual advances being used as a pathway to promotion, as reported by some respondents, is particularly alarming and indicative of the deep-seated gender biases that persist in the sector. This study therefore, underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions to address the systemic barriers

that prevent women from fully participating and advancing in the humanitarian sector. By fostering a more inclusive and supportive work environment, the humanitarian sector can better leverage the diverse perspectives and talents of women, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness and impact of humanitarian efforts globally.

5.2. Recommendations

1. Strengthening Collaboration Between (I)NGOs and Grassroots Women's Rights Organizations

- **Long-term Partnerships:** Actors in the humanitarian assistance sector should establish and invest in sustainable partnerships with grassroots women's rights organizations. Co-design localized responses that leverage community connections and cultural expertise to create interventions that are effective and context-sensitive.
- **Facilitating Dialogue Platforms:** Governments and INGOs should create platforms for dialogue and collaboration to align strategies across organizations. These platforms should include grassroots groups, community leaders, and security actors to ensure that the planning of gender-sensitive approaches reflects diverse insights and experiences.

2. Intergrating Gender Equity into Organizational Culture and Policies

- **Enforcing Policies:** Humanitarian organizations should develop and enforce gender equity policies aligned with international frameworks such as CEDAW and UNSCR 1325. These policies must be backed by gender-sensitive budgeting practices that prioritize funding for gender-responsive initiatives.
- **National Policies:** Governments should ensure that national policies actively promote women's participation in decision-making processes. Women's networks and security actors can advocate for the adoption of gender-sensitive recruitment and engagement practices, ensuring that policies are implemented effectively.

3. Transforming Organizational Norms and Practices for Gender Equity

- **Revising Recruitment and Promotion Processes:** Hu-

manitarian organizations should review recruitment and promotion practices, introducing gender quotas where necessary, and implementing training programs that support women's professional growth and career advancement.

- **Supporting Work-Life Balance:** Employers in the humanitarian assistance sector must develop policies that facilitate work-life balance, such as flexible working arrangements and on-site childcare, to support women in their roles. Training programs on gender-based violence prevention and response should also be integrated to create safer and more supportive work environments.

4. Conducting Gender Audits for Inclusivity and Accountability

- **Regular Gender Audits:** Humanitarian organizations and governments should conduct gender audits periodically to identify gaps in gender equity efforts and inform action plans based on data-driven analysis.
- **Collaboration with Women's Networks:** Women's networks can collaborate with organizations to monitor progress, share best practices, and provide accountability measures for ensuring that gender equity standards are upheld.

5. Facilitating Mentorship, Training, and Capacity Strengthening

- **Investment in Training Programs:** Humanitarian organizations like the HAWA project, along with partner organizations and governments, should invest in leadership training and professional development programs for women. This includes capacity strengthening in areas strategic areas that allow for career mobility.
- **Mentorship Opportunities:** Women's networks can work with organizations to provide ongoing mentorship and career guidance for women. Human resource departments should ensure that women are trained in leadership and key competencies, preparing them for senior roles in humanitarian settings.

6. Addressing Gender-Based Violence and Harassment

- **Zero-Tolerance Policies:** Humanitarian organizations must implement comprehensive anti-harassment and

- anti-violence policies with transparent reporting mechanisms and independent investigations. These policies should explicitly define gender-based violence, harassment, and exploitation, and set clear consequences for perpetrators.
- **Training Security Personnel:** Governments should enforce international conventions ensuring safe work environments, and security personnel must be trained on protocols for handling cases of gender-based violence. Women’s networks can offer support services, raise awareness, and advocate for the enforcement of protective measures.
7. **Increasing Research and Data Collection on Gender Disparities**
- **Collecting Disaggregated Data:** Humanitarian organizations should prioritize collecting and analyzing gender-disaggregated data to identify disparities and inform policy. This data should guide efforts to improve representation in leadership roles and to develop initiatives that address these gaps.
 - **Research Initiatives:** Investing in research initiatives will allow organizations to monitor the impact of gender equity policies. Women’s networks and security actors can use this data to support evidence-based advocacy and develop strategies that respond to identified needs.
8. **Advocating for Country-Specific Legal Reforms and Policies**
- **Supporting Advocacy Efforts:** Humanitarian organizations and security actors should collaborate to align national frameworks with international gender standards. This collaboration should extend to supporting women’s networks in grassroots mobilization efforts to ensure the successful implementation of gender-equity measures.
 - **Legal Compliance and Monitoring:** Women’s networks and community-based organizations can play a role in monitoring the compliance and effectiveness of gender reforms, advocating for improvements where necessary.

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