

## **“I Knew Something Was Wrong From My Whole Life”: Epistemic Governance and the Training of Refugee Women in GBV Prevention Programming**

### *Abstract*

Trainings to end gender-based violence (GBV) have become a cornerstone of humanitarian response in refugee settings, reaching millions of participants annually. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Jordan and Bangladesh, this paper examines how GBV trainings directed at refugee women operate as a form of epistemic governance that legitimize certain forms of knowledge over others. Three arguments follow. First, the training apparatus is premised on the epistemic deficiency of refugee women, positioning them as not-yet-knowing subjects whose understanding of their own lives requires institutional correction, despite evidence that refugee women consistently demonstrate prior, expansive knowledge of harm. Second, the survivor-centered approach formally names survivors as experts while structurally undermining that designation, delivering empowerment without the conditions for its exercise. Third, vocational empowerment programming individuates responsibility for gendered violence onto refugee women’s productivity and resilience, rendering structural conditions invisible. Together, these dynamics reveal an apparatus that fails not from lack of knowledge, but from a hierarchy that has decided in advance whose knowledge counts.

“If all people become rich, does this stop GBV? Never. This is linked to the deep social norms. Need to change the people. Have a more positive impact on the people. This is *super difficult*. Have to work for a very long time to make a small change.” (MSF GBV Trainer JOPO2 2023).<sup>1</sup>

“Awareness-raising is a fundamental component of UNHCR’s GBV prevention strategy to enhance gender equality and gender inclusion... foster[ing] communication and information exchange to improve mutual understanding of GBV and the related harms within the communities... and promote change in attitudes and behaviour.” (UNHCR 2024)

### **1.1 Introduction**

On a warm September afternoon, I follow Dr. Saif through the courtyard of a community-based organization (CBO) in Amman.<sup>2</sup> Dr. Saif is a Syrian refugee who organizes awareness raising and GBV prevention trainings at the CBO that serves refugee populations across the city. As we move through the sunny courtyard, ducking under a bougainvillea branch ripe with magenta flowers, some “beneficiaries” wave and casually call out friendly greetings to Dr. Saif, who waves and smiles back.

---

<sup>1</sup> Interviews and participant observation sessions are cited with an anonymized country code (JO for Jordan, BD for Bangladesh), method (I for interview, P for participant observation), participant number, and year. For example, JOI7 2023 refers to the seventh interview conducted in Jordan in 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Name changed to protect participant anonymity.

Dr. Saif opens the metal blue door and I blink in the fluorescent lighting as we enter a meeting room where nine older men are seated in front of a whiteboard with the words “7th Training to End GBV” written in red marker in Arabic. On one wall, a poster titled the “Violence Tree” catches my eye with the roots labeled “unequal power” and “negative beliefs”, branches spreading into “wife-beating”, “unhappiness”, and others. The instructor, wearing a navy suit and a lavender shirt, pauses at our entry and nods in greeting to Dr. Saif, who routinely supervises his work.

The instructor turns back to the men and resumes, “Even if you are a very important person outside the home, you have responsibilities and you can still do small tasks to provide.” The men peer at the whiteboard, scratching their gray heads and adjusting their glasses, closely listening. The instructor smiles at them, “If violence enters the door of the house, love jumps out the window.” Laughter from the group fills the classroom. The instructor continues, “if you come home and your house is a mess, food is everywhere, the children are unwashed, and you find your wife on her phone, do not ask, ‘why is the house a mess?’ Instead, decide ‘I won’t do anything’. Then, stay at home for two days and see what happens, see all that she does. ‘What did you do all day?’ is a disrespectful question. You can do things to help. You should take out the trash. When she is cooking, cut the onions on her behalf. Do not raise your voice.” The men nod along, some jotting notes down on small pads of paper with the organization’s logo on the front. “Now, we’re nearly done here for today, so what is the most important thing that you learned from this session?”

A man scratches his stubbly white beard and raises his hand, the first to speak. “Our previous training is incorrect. There are differences in the sexes and I now understand the role they play in society. I’m learning these behaviors and definitions.” His Iraqi Arabic clips through the phrases.

A second participant with red cheeks and a large mole at the tip of his nose, adjusts his glasses and raises his hand. “Thank you a lot to the professor and the instructors. Our discussion of social issues helps us to form opinions.” His Syrian dialect is softer, and I have to strain to catch all of his words. A beat of quiet follows before he adds, “I thank you for that.” Around him, several men nod slowly, as if turning something over in their minds.

\*\*\*

This scene crystallizes many of the dynamics at play in GBV trainings conducted for refugee populations around the world. From the causal logic inscribed on the Violence Tree, locating gender-based violence in “negative beliefs”, to the earnest thanks participants offered instructors for correcting their very ideas, these trainings operate with loaded assumptions, wherein refugee women were portrayed as victims, refugee men were situated as perpetrators, and LGBTQ+ refugees were invisibilized altogether. These assumptions emerge from institutionalized expertise that travels downward through the humanitarian system and arrives, as here, in a community center in Amman, carried out by a professional expert in a navy suit.

Globally, UNHCR allocated US\$137.1 million to GBV programming across 86 countries in 2024, reaching over 1.6 million people through case management, safe spaces, legal aid, and prevention programming including training and awareness-raising.<sup>3</sup> Of relevance to this case, in Cox’s Bazar alone, GBV awareness sessions reached 478,024 Rohingya refugees in 2024, delivered by a sub-sector comprising more than 71 member organizations (UNHCR 2025a; Rohingya Refugee Response 2025). In Jordan that same year, UNHCR trained 2,580 government and NGO staff on GBV case management and safe referral, while delivering awareness sessions

---

<sup>3</sup> It is worth mentioning that GBV remains chronically underfunded across UNHCR and other UN programming, with the \$137.1 million budgeted in 2024 representing just 2.8% of UNHCR’s 2024 budget of \$4.933 billion. Also, GBV budgets are not disaggregated, but rather, different types of interventions are not listed by line item, obscuring what is actually spent on each component. Requests for clarification on these numbers were not returned.

to a further 2,700 staff (UNHCR 2025b). As stated in the UNHCR quote at the start of this paper, UNHCR sees training as a “fundamental component of UNCHR’s GBV prevention strategy.” (2). In this research’s interviews, all but one participant had enrolled in one or more GBV trainings, which is a testament to their wide reach and normalization across the refugee humanitarian regime.

The widespread offering of trainings on GBV stems from the identification in global forums for the need to drive transformative change through the transformation of individuals’ beliefs and ideas. In the words of the 1995 Beijing Declaration, trainings are a key strategy for ending violence against women and girls, listing the following under “action to be taken” by governments to prevent and eliminate violence against women:

Organize and fund information campaigns and educational and training programmes in order to sensitize girls and boys and women and men to the personal and social detrimental effects of violence in the family, community and society; teach them how to communicate without violence and promote training for victims and potential victims so that they can protect themselves and others against such violence (1995).<sup>4</sup>

In this view, ending GBV can be brought about by teaching, or sensitizing, “girls and boys and women and men” who are potential victims of perpetrators of GBV, that this violence is inherently wrong, and that there are resources to push back against such violence. While such trainings circulate broadly across contexts, they take on particular significance in refugee settings, where displacement has often severed the social networks, legal protections, and community structures through which norms are ordinarily transmitted and contested (Holvikivi 2023; Banerjee 2024; Mukhopadhyay et al. 2007). In this setting, trainings operate as a mechanism for knowledge dissemination, professional capacity-building, and norm transformation from global spaces to

---

<sup>4</sup> The Beijing Declaration is significant for many reasons, as it led to the launching of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda under UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

NGO offices, refugee community centers, and individual homes. By engaging key stakeholders, such as social workers, government officials, healthcare providers, and law enforcement, as well as refugees themselves, trainings aim to create norm cascades (Sikkink 2011) where diffusion of knowledge and attitudes lead to broader systemic change.

At first glance, humanitarian GBV trainings appear to be tools aimed at preventing violence by educating potential perpetrators about their responsibilities and connecting survivors with medical, legal, and psychosocial support. However, beneath this surface lies a complex web of assumptions, problematizations, and normative values that often go unexamined. This paper interrogates the dual orientation of these top-down trainings with the women refugee “beneficiaries” or trainees on one side and the humanitarian, NGO, and local trainers who are themselves trained to design and implement such programs, on the other. This paper reveals how anti-GBV trainings not only aim to transmit knowledge but also reproduce particular conceptualizations of victimhood that perpetuate heteronormative assumptions about gendered violence and reinforce a neoliberal conception of individualized self-improvement as the most achievable and implementable route to end GBV.

This paper proceeds as follows. Section 1.2 examines anti-GBV trainings as a site where a hierarchy of knowledge is both produced and contested through the work of professional experts. I first provide a brief overview of my methods. Section 2.0 situates how anti-GBV trainings within the IR literature on epistemic communities and communities of practice, examining the points of origin of pedagogical authority that structures these trainings as well as asking whose knowledge it recognizes, and whose it marginalizes. The following empirical sections (3.1-3.3) examine how refugee women are typically engaged with through vocational training as a means of “empowering” them to no longer be caught within abuse. Here the politics of expertise has direct

consequences for refugees wherein those whose experiences and knowledge are drawn upon to justify training programs are simultaneously positioned as objects of reform rather than as knowledge producers. Trainers describe their work as “making refugee experiences *known* to them [refugee women] as GBV” (JOI13 2023). This formulation positions institutionalized expertise as the source of authoritative knowledge about refugees’ own lives, enacting a Eurocentric epistemic hierarchy. Overall, I argue that GBV trainings reproduce the hierarchical ordering of expertise, with scientific over professional, professional over local, institutional over experiential, through the very mechanisms designed to address gendered harm, transferring responsibility for structural violence onto the individuals least positioned to resolve it.

### *1.1 Methods*

This research draws on Nair (2021) by both “studying up” (Nader 1972) and “hanging out” (Geertz 1998) with elite implementers of GBV governance frameworks as well as refugees who navigate, negotiate, and contest these structures at the implementation level. Examining large-scale international projects, such as the UN-wide mandate to reduce GBV and ‘mainstream’ gender (Ediae, Favour Chikwe, and Namiro Kuteesa 2024; Cavaghan 2017), requires attention to both high level experts as well as those who navigate the everyday micropolitics of meaning making (Autesserre 2014; Ferguson and Alarcón 2016). To do so, I undertook 12 months of ethnographic research and conducted 116 semi-structured interviews as part of a doctoral research project. 61 interviews were conducted in Jordan, 38 in Bangladesh, and 17 at the Sexual Violence Research Initiative Global Forum (2024) in South Africa to interview international GBV experts, clinicians, and advisors working within or alongside organizations such as the World Health Organization

(WHO), UNICEF, and UNFPA. Of these, 41 interviews were conducted with refugees and 75 with non-refugee actors.<sup>5</sup>

## 2.0 Making and Training the Expert

While some research has examined the role of trainings in peacekeeping missions (Puechguirbal 2003; Angela 2003) and military operations (Holvikivi 2021), trainings as a mechanism of global governance have mixed attention within IR scholarship. While explored richly across development studies, especially with attention to feminist knowledge transfers (Porter and Smyth 1998; Baker and Etherington 2016), education studies (Heras-Sevilla, Ortega-Sánchez, and Rubia-Avi 2021; Blanchard and Thacker 2013), and organizational studies (McLindon, Fiolet, and Hegarty 2021) as well as within NGO gray literature (MOSAIC 2024), global governance lacks a consistent theorization of the role of trainings. Where trainings do appear in the literature, they are typically treated as implementation vehicles for norm diffusion rather than as sites of political and epistemic contestation in their own right, or as background machinery through which the foreground processes of norm entrepreneurship (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998) and transnational advocacy (Keck and Sikkink 2014) are operationalized. The closest engagements come from adjacent literatures. Ethnographers of development and intervention, notably Li (2007) and Ferguson (1994), have examined the “will to improve” and the “anti-politics machine” respectively showing how technical interventions render structural problems as matters of knowledge deficit and individual behavior, though without focusing on training specifically. Autesserre’s (2014) account of “peaceland” captures the professional culture of humanitarian and peacebuilding actors and the standardized toolkits they carry across contexts,

---

<sup>5</sup> Given the word limit of this paper and the fact that this work is drawn from a dissertation chapter, the methods I have provided here are a condensed version.

again gesturing toward but not centering the training encounter. Within feminist IR and the WPS literature, scholars have begun to examine the professionalization of gender expertise and the training regimes that sustain it, such as Prügl (2023) on the institutionalization of feminist knowledge in global governance, Haastrup and Hagen (2021) on racialized hierarchies within WPS professionalization, and Shepherd (2016) on the pedagogical dimensions of gender training in security sector reform. Sending's (2015) account of epistemic governance in global health and development comes closest to theorizing the mechanism this paper examines, which focuses on the practices through which certain knowledges are legitimized while others are excluded, but Sending does not address training as such. This paper builds on and extends these contributions by treating the training encounter as a primary site of analysis where epistemic governance is enacted, subjectivities are produced, and the hierarchy of expertise is reproduced through the apparently neutral transmission of knowledge.

Yet, questions of who gets to define and disseminate the “right” social beliefs through trainings, and under what conditions does this authority become institutionalized are vital, given their prominence in this case and others. The proliferation of trainings in humanitarian and peacebuilding contexts has elevated certain actors, namely gender experts, consultants, and trainers, to the role of professional experts. Scholarship on epistemic communities, transnational guilds, and communities of practice helps illuminate how such figures consolidate legitimacy through shared norms, professional affiliations, and claims to specialized knowledge. Yet, these frameworks often obscure how access to expert status is structured by geopolitical, racialized, and classed hierarchies. The authority to teach bolsters certain forms of scientific and institutional expertise and sets the terms of GBV knowledge that is then delivered throughout trainings. In this way, local and experiential expertise is incorporated instrumentally as translation capacity or

community access without receiving equivalent recognition as authoritative knowledge. Refugees are ironically seen as both needing reform and as key figures in implementing trainings successfully due to their local connections and ability to translate, both literally and conceptually. This dual positioning is the structural consequence of a hierarchy in which experiential and local knowledge is valued as data for its utility in delivery while being denied recognition as a source of authoritative knowledge.

Epistemic communities play an important role in professional expertise and this ordered gatekeeping. Epistemic communities, which are defined by shared normative and causal beliefs, common vocabularies, and institutional embeddedness in donor-driven mandates, generate authority to define what counts as valid and teachable knowledge and who is the correct teacher of that knowledge, institutionalizing professional expertise (Haas 1992; Adler and Bernstein 2020). In GBV interventions, these communities are constituted through institutional pathways, such as training programs developed at elite Global North universities, such as in partnerships between UN agencies and institutions such as Johns Hopkins' Center for Humanitarian Health or the George Washington University "Putting Survivors at the Center" training program (Hopkins 2025; Vu et al. 2014), and privatized certification regimes that reward fluency in standardized, evidence-based intervention frameworks (Dataville Research 2025). Bigo (2017) concept of transnational guilds extends epistemic communities by showing how professional networks of security experts, bureaucrats and technocrats consolidate authority across borders through shared credentialing and exclusionary gatekeeping. Epistemic communities and transnational guilds may circulate globally, but their expertise is rooted in specific institutionalized forms that shape whose trainings are deemed valid, evidence-based, and results-oriented. Relatedly, and common in humanitarian settings, communities of practice (CoPs) operate at a different level, shaping how

this expert knowledge is socialized into humanitarian organizations through repeated training sessions, standard operating procedures, and shared institutional routines (Pring 2023; Adler and Pouliot 2011). Where epistemic communities define the strategic aims and normative assumptions underpinning training programs, CoPs are the organizational spaces in which those assumptions become naturalized through practice.

Both epistemic communities and CoPs, however, can obscure the political and racialized structures through which humanitarian expertise is produced and maintained. As Haastrup and Hagen (2021) show, professionalization within humanitarian governance has entrenched racialized hierarchies of knowledge under the guise of normative consensus. The institutions that generate and credential expertise, typically elite Global North universities and international organizations, function as gatekeepers, rendering local and experiential knowledge either invisible or legible only through the limiting frame of the native informant. Chimni (2004)'s critique of the transnational capitalist class makes the same point at a structural level, explaining that what appears as objective, evidence-based expertise is embedded in global inequalities that determine whose knowledge travels and whose does not. Training thus operates simultaneously as norm diffusion (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Acharya 2009) and as a form of vernacularization in which international GBV discourses are translated into locally resonant terms through uneven and hierarchical processes, which can leave under-resourced local and refugee trainers responsible for implementation even when funding cycles are cut short and institutional support withdrawn (Merry 2021). What is transmitted through training is not only information about GBV but a set of subjectivities, such as resilient survivors, unknowing perpetrators, gender champions that locate responsibility for ending violence in individual behavior rather than in the structural conditions that produce it.

### 3.0 Teaching Women How to Not Be Abused

In both Jordan and Bangladesh, efforts to respond to and prevent GBV consistently position refugee women in a double register. On the one hand, they are portrayed as victims requiring protection and on the other, they portrayed as resilient and adaptable champions capable of securing their own safety. As one Jordan-based humanitarian explained, “Women are stronger than men. More engaged. More full of hope than men...Women are more patient. She can adapt more. She looks after all the family” (JOI20 2023). This double positioning of both victim and champion simultaneously undergirds the pedagogical architecture of women-focused GBV programming, and it produces a distinctive burden wherein refugee women are expected to be reformed by training and to become, through that reform, the agents of their own protection.

#### 3.1 *From Victims to Survivors*

The long-enduring image of “the refugee woman” structures anti-GBV programming (Khan, Sackeyfio, and Paraketsova 2020; Baines 2004; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014; Buckley-Zistel and Krause 2017), positioning women and children as passive victims requiring rescue from humanitarian actors who style themselves as neutral advocates of the weak (Kennedy 2008). The survivor-centered approach emerged as a deliberate corrective to this framing, placing survivors at the core of decision-making and viewing refugee women not as victims, but as capable agents of their own recovery. As Michelis, Makepeace, and Reis (2025) explained, the survivor-centered approach “is rooted in Western feminist theory and practice which establish survivors of GBV as experts on the violence they have experienced and their own journey towards safety, healing, and recovery.” (1515). The language here is significant. In the survivor-centered approach, survivors are named as experts, which is a rare and nascent institutional acknowledgment of non-institutionalized expertise. Yet, as this section shows, this acknowledgment is undermined by the very apparatus through which the survivor-centered approach is delivered.

At an MSF training in Amman, the trainer emphasized that when working with survivors, the survivor-centered approach was one of the four core tenets that should guide humanitarian action. “The survivor knows the situation better. Our job is to share the information about the services that exist. All the consequences from her decision and she can support herself.” (JOPO 2023). The formulation articulates how the survivor’s superior knowledge of her own situation is acknowledged, but is then immediately bracketed as the humanitarian’s role is then reestablished as that of sharing information as opposed to drawing on what the survivor already knows. The trainer continued, “She has different strengths, abilities, resources and needs. We try to focus on the strengths. She also has the right, appropriate to her age and circumstances, to determine who should know what happened to her and what should happen next.” (JOPO 2023). Decision-making is placed formally in the hands of the survivor, but within a framework designed, resourced, and delivered entirely by professional experts whose own assumptions about what survivors need structure the options available. In the words of the trainer, “the survivor has the right to determine their own next steps. We have no right to.” (JOPO 2023).

In practice, this formal empowerment often produces its own burden. Scholars have cautioned that the survivor-centered approach is under-defined (Clark 2021) and that in practice it frequently returns decision-making to humanitarian actors, as survivors lack the resources, information, and institutional access to exercise the agency nominally granted to them (Michelis, Makepeace, and Reis 2025). This research confirms and extends those findings. As one Rohingya survivor explained, “This system is unknown to me. In the camp, the social worker spoke about the ‘survivor’, that’s me, deciding what should come next. But I had no idea. I just wanted this to go away.” (BDI26 2024). The phrase “this system is unknown to me” is analytically rich, showing how the survivor-centered approach assumes a survivor who can navigate legal, medical, and

social institutions, but refugee women frequently face those institutions without the linguistic, legal, or material resources to do so. The training produces the language of agency without the conditions for its exercise. Similarly, another Syrian woman survivor explained, exhausted, “I cannot do it alone. Where is the international community? They talk about ‘survivor-this’, but I have no one.” (JOI58 2023). Together, these accounts reveal that individuating decision-making onto survivors, without addressing the structural conditions, such as restricted movement, limited healthcare, precarious legal status, that constrain those decisions, transforms empowerment into abandonment.

### 3.2 *Knowing GBV*

A central premise of GBV training for refugee women is that violence is present but unrecognized, meaning that women experience harm without the conceptual tools to name it as such. Trainers often describe refugee women as initially unable to identify the violations they experience because violence appears as a normal occurrence, an inevitability, or an expression of love. A Bangladeshi practitioner explained, “Domestic violence is still there, in full swing... Many do not say, and many do not understand the violence that is happening to them. They think it’s normal, it can happen, and he’s my husband, he can do it to me” (BDI31 2024). This normalization becomes a clear object of intervention and making refugee women *understand* is a key objective of training. As one practitioner put it, “We gave them some activities on what we can do to reduce gender-based violence when it happens...They [refugee women] need to know these terms as they are going through it...but the environment in which she will raise her voice is not there. Because she doesn’t know about those things” (BDI16 2024). The goal, then, is to cultivate a new attention and understanding that renders violence visible, nameable, and wrong.

GBV trainings thus function as epistemological interventions, premised on the assumption that recognition must precede resistance, and that the conceptual tools for recognition must be supplied from outside the community. A UN Women staff member emphasized, “Women should have spaces where they can speak up and understand what is happening to them” (SAI9 2024). This translation work presents a real challenge. A Jordanian NGO worker noted, “We have to teach them the very meaning of privacy... even what is gender. This word can be controversial here, so you can imagine how tough it is to teach what even GBV is” (JOI22 2023). The framing reveals a key assumption wherein refugee women are positioned as epistemically deficient and as not-yet-knowing subjects whose understanding of their own lives must be corrected by institutional expertise before they can act.

And yet, refugee women are not blank slates. Their responses to training reveal not ignorance but a prior and often expansive knowledge that the training apparatus neither solicits nor recognizes. One Rohingya woman, reflecting on her training, offered a definition of GBV that both echoed and exceeded the training curriculum. “GBV means if a girl who is below 18 years and a boy who is below 21 years get married... GBV stands for rape. Physical violence, sexual violence, emotional violence... Emotional violence is the denigration of those who look weak, the denigration of the disabled, the envy of those who have money and those who don’t” (BDI33 2024). She adopts humanitarian terms while extending them into her own idioms of harm and exclusion. She continued, “I did not need *them* [humanitarians] to show me that. I knew something was wrong from my whole life.” (BDI33 2024). This clarifies both how experiential knowledge precedes the training as well as the lack of acknowledgement from the trainer.

The social conditions of attending trainings are themselves revealing. Several participants in Cox’s Bazar explained that attending a GBV training carries social risk. A Bangladeshi

practitioner noted, “They [other refugees] think, ‘she is not married, so she is in risk. If women are going to the GBV training, why is the meeting four or five hours?’ There are so many questions... absenteeism rates for women and girls are higher, but still they come” (BDI8 2024). That women attend despite these risks signals their own investment in these spaces, yet their contributions are rarely registered or reciprocated by the training apparatus. Similarly, when a Yemeni refugee woman in Jordan encouraged a friend facing domestic violence to seek help, her suggestion was met with resistance. “She just heard from me: ‘you want me to divorce my husband’. I was like, ‘what! No.’ I was shocked, he is even violating her. But it is something I guess she needs to learn herself” (JOI35 2023). Even when the language of GBV is available, its uptake depends on personal, emotional, and social conditions that lie beyond the reach of curricula.

Yet many refugee women found training meaningful precisely because it confirmed and legitimized what they already knew. A divorced Rohingya woman shared, “I enjoyed it so much that I’m now working to keep children safe... I am teaching them in the camps” (BDI7 2024). Her enthusiasm signals how the institutional recognition of knowledge she possessed through her lived experience motivated her to share what she knew and legitimized her work. Others spoke of slow but meaningful shifts in collective norms. “When someone has to get married with a dowry,” one woman explained, “[organization name]’s aunts go there and say something that makes us realize that we are doing the wrong thing” (BDI2 2024). These moments reveal the possibilities of plural forms of expertise, in which refugee women draw on their own lives and experiences to remake what training offers.

The same Yemeni refugee woman in Amman offered perhaps the clearest articulation of this dynamic, “In Yemen, we have a traditional culture. It is different for us and this was missing from us.” (JOI35 2023). For her, the training filled a void, not only informing her that “when a girl

turns 18 years old, she can choose her own way of life,” but legitimizing her own choice to marry outside her tribe. She explained, “When I heard that we have voices and that we should use them, I felt really happy because this is what I had done when I went against my family and chose my husband and said, ‘this is the one for me.’” The training retroactively conferred institutionalized legitimacy on her past agency, which she had already exercised. Trainings, in this compounded form, can produce new possibilities when it works with experiential expertise.

Finally, many participants expressed ambiguity about programs once rapport had been more established. One participant summarized what was often repeated across many interviews, “I don’t mind the concepts very much... But I get a little money for transportation and I can use that to feed my son. That makes the trainings really worthwhile for me.” (BDI38 2024). Her pragmatism shows how the pedagogical space is embedded in an economy of scarcity, and participation is shaped by material necessity as much as epistemic openness. Thus, it is important to note that trainings are not only about knowledge, but also can open up some opportunities for resources.

### *3.3 Empowerment*

A second, increasingly popular approach to addressing GBV in refugee settings is framed through the language of “empowerment”, and speaks to a shift in conceptualizing refugee women, not as victims, but as capable doers who can bring about an end to GBV through earning an income. These programs rarely engage with violence directly. Instead, they aim to reduce vulnerability by promoting “self-reliance” typically through vocational training, small business development, or so-called life skills programs. The activities vary, such as embroidery, soap-making, eyebrow threading, solar panel installation, but the underlying logic points to the neoliberal idea that

learning skills that provide economic independence will lead to decreased GBV. Creating self-sufficient actors allows IOs to omit structural change.

In both Jordan and Bangladesh, such programs were ubiquitous. In Za’atari Camp, UN Women offered embroidery workshops where Syrian women stitched wallets and keychains to be sold in Amman. In Amman, women were taught to thread eyebrows, decorate chocolate boxes, and cultivate indoor plants. In Cox’s Bazar, Rohingya women stitched cushions and pillowcases for NGO displays to be sold in Dhaka. Some of these activities were explicitly labeled “income-generating,” while others were framed around less tangible goals like “self-confidence” or “social cohesion.” Regardless of branding, the programs all shared the same foundational belief that when women gain skills, they gain options, and that with options comes safety.

Organizational staff often emphasized this link between empowerment and protection. “Women’s empowerment and GBV fluctuate and we try to target both with our livelihoods training,” explained one Jordanian NGO staff member. “They create handicrafts and strengthen cooking skills to end violence against women” (JOI23 2023). Another program coordinator described their work as fostering “resilience and self-reliance, ultimately decreasing experiences of GBV in the target community” (JOI11 2023). The causal chain, linking skills to income, income to resilience, resilience to safety, is stated as self-evident, with no account of the structural conditions that interrupt it at every stage. Programs were also understood to change not only a woman’s circumstances but her identity. “Empowerment and awareness are the only ways out, in my opinion,” said a staff member from a royal NGO. “And we do this through training women how to work, bring in funds, and ultimately, the program helps you understand yourself” (JOI6 2023). What is being offered is a new subjectivity of oneself as the productive, self-understanding,

emotionally resilient refugee woman who has overcome her circumstances through individual effort.

Organizations often substantiated this vision with tightly packaged success stories. One NGO manager described a Syrian woman who began the program as “not worth anything,” but after taking a business training course, “headed her businesses with her husband,” and is now “one of the best artists in Jordan.” The manager added, “She is providing a good income for both the children, for her house. She’s the household now” (JOI11 2023). The phrase “not worth anything” reveals the baseline against which empowerment is measured wherein a refugee woman’s worth is defined entirely by her economic productivity (Sen 2020). These success stories are powerful institutional narratives that justify program design, satisfy donor requirements, and make structural problems appear solvable through individual transformation. They are also, necessarily, stories about exceptional women, which quietly confirms that ordinary women who do not achieve this transformation have simply not tried hard enough.

Yet refugee women’s own experiences with these programs revealed a more ambivalent reality. While some found genuine value, such as new skills or friendship, many described empowerment as a demand rather than a gift. Many described feeling pressure to transform themselves and to succeed against the odds, with empowerment as a burden. One Syrian participant, reflecting on her efforts to support other women and run her own business, offered a blunt metaphor, “I had a business, but it closed. I have seen some success here, but you need strength to survive here. If you are not a shark, you won’t survive” (JOI14 2023). Survival, in these, terms requires aggression, competition, and toughness, which are precisely the qualities that the empowerment framework celebrates but that are not equally available to everyone, particularly after displacement, loss, and ongoing precarity.

Other women were frustrated by how these programs narrated their lives. “In our trainings, women are always the victim and men the abuser,” said one woman. “I don’t appreciate this because my husband and I have suffered together. And neither of us are only victims” (JOI9 2023). Another added, “They fit us into stereotypes that do not really fit, just to push us towards their ‘learning objective’” (JOI10 2023). These critiques show that women whose experiential knowledge does not always match the institutional framework. Instead, participants are cast into pre-written roles delivered from professional experts who seek to empower them.

The empowerment framework also carries an implicit moral hierarchy. The woman who remains dependent on her husband, who does not speak in workshops, or who still experiences violence is not seen as someone facing structural obstacles, but as someone who has failed to become empowered. This logic shifts the responsibility for protection onto the individual woman. As one Jordanian caseworker admitted, “We try to train them to understand ‘family protection,’ but in reality, Syrian men have no services, women face physical and psychological trauma from the past. Girls face early marriage, boys face child labor. I really don’t know how much the training can help.” (JOI17 2023). She names the full cascade of structural conditions, such as men without services, unaddressed trauma, child marriage, child labor, and questions all that the training curriculum cannot reach. The professional experts closest to those experiencing GBV are the one most aware that behavioral solutions cannot address structural causes.

What empowerment programming reveals is the subtle displacement of responsibility onto individual survivors. For some, these programs open real doors to skills, income, or simply to spaces outside the home where other possibilities become imaginable. For others, they represent a further demand to perform resilience and to convert trauma into productivity under conditions the training apparatus has done nothing to change. The woman who cannot do this is seen as someone

who has not yet been sufficiently empowered. In this way, empowerment becomes not just a tool but a test.

#### **4.0 Conclusion**

This paper has argued that GBV trainings in refugee settings constitute a form of epistemic governance in which the causes of gendered violence are located in the incorrect beliefs of individual refugees rather than in the structural conditions of displacement, legal precarity, and institutional abandonment that shape their lives. That diagnostic logic, produced by scientific and institutional experts far from the communities they govern, travels downward through humanitarian organizations and professional practitioners, arriving standardized and donor-approved in community centers in Amman and Cox's Bazar. In this formulation, refugee women are taught to recognize their victimization and transcend it through resilience and employability. The survivor-centered approach formally names survivors as experts on their own situations, then delivers that recognition through a system that cannot accommodate what survivors actually know.

Yet the refugee women who appear in this research arrive in training rooms with prior, expansive, and embodied knowledge of harm that precedes the curriculum, exceeds its categories, and is neither solicited nor recognized by the apparatus that claims to serve them. A seasoned practitioner who has delivered GBV trainings across refugee and non-refugee populations in Jordan for many years captured the consequences, stating, "What I have found is that actually, now, people have a pretty good understanding of what is GBV and they can talk about it in a good way. They have all the right language. But, if you work with them and dig deeper, nothing practical has changed. Child marriage has even risen, behavior hasn't changed at all. It doesn't reside in something that is real. It's all theoretical." (JOI26 2023). Epistemic governance can produce fluency without transformation, equipping people with the correct vocabulary for naming harm while leaving the conditions that produce harm untouched. What training does instead is transfer

responsibility for protection from institutions to individuals, which ensures that failure is located in the person rather than the program, in the community rather than the conditions, and that responsibility never travels back up the hierarchy to those who designed the system in the first place.

## References Cited

1995. Beijing Platform for Action: Violence Against Women Diagnosis. edited by United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women: UN Women.
- Acharya, Amitav. 2009. *Whose ideas matter? : agency and power in Asian regionalism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Adler, Emanuel, and Steven Bernstein. 2020. "Knowledge in Power: The epistemic construction of global governance." In *Power in Global Governance*, edited by Michael N. Barnett and Raymond Duvall. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Adler, Emanuel, and Vincent Pouliot. 2011. *International Practices*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Angela, Mackay. 2003. "Training the Uniforms: Gender and Peacekeeping Operations." *Development in Practice* 13 (2-3):217-222.
- Autesserre, Séverine. 2014. *Peaceland : conflict resolution and the everyday politics of international intervention*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Baines, Erin K. 2004. *Vulnerable bodies : gender, the UN and the global refugee crisis, Gender in a global/local world*. Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate.
- Baker, Linda, and Nicole Etherington. 2016. Gender-Based Violence Training programs: Online, face-to-face, and blended formats. London, ON: Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children.
- Banerjee, Deeplina. 2024. "Moving from gender responsive to gender transformative action: What Canada achieved and missed in its Rohingya response strategy in Bangladesh." *International Journal* 79 (1):126-137. doi: 10.1177/00207020241234208.
- Bigo, Didier. 2017. "Sociology of Transnational Guilds." *International Political Sociology* 10 (4):398-416. doi: 10.1093/ips/olw022 %J International Political Sociology.
- Blanchard, P. Nick, and James W. Thacker. 2013. *Effective training : systems, strategies, and practices*. 5th ed. Boston: Pearson Education.
- Buckley-Zistel, Susanne, and Ulrike Krause. 2017. *Gender, violence, refugees*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Cavaghan, Rosalind. 2017. *Making gender equality happen : knowledge, change and resistance in EU gender mainstreaming*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Chimni, B. S. 2004. "International Institutions Today: An imperial global state in the making." *EJIL* 15 (1):1-37.
- Clark, Janine Natalya. 2021. "Beyond a 'survivor-centred approach' to conflict-related sexual violence?" *International Affairs* 97 (4):1067-1084. doi: 10.1093/ia/iab055.

- Dataville Research, LLC. 2025. "Professional Certificate in Gender-Based Violence and Response." <https://datavillegroup.com/professional-certificate-in-gender-based-violence-and-response/>.
- Ediae, A. A. , C. Favour Chikwe, and K. Namiiro Kuteesa. 2024. "The impact of gender mainstreaming on humanitarian aid delivery: A policy analysis." *International Journal of Applied Research in Social Sciences* 6 (4).
- Ferguson, James. 1994. *The anti-politics machine : "development," depoliticization, and bureaucratic power in Lesotho*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Ferguson, Lucy, and Daniella Moreno Alarcón. 2016. "Gender Expertise and the Private Sector." In *The Politics of Feminist Knowledge Transfer: Gender Training and Gender Expertise*, edited by María Bustelo, Lucy Ferguson and Maxime Forest, 62-79. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Elena. 2014. *The ideal refugees : gender, Islam, and the Sahrawi politics of survival*. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press.
- Finnemore, Martha, and Kathryn Sikkink. 1998. "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change." *International Organization* 52 (4):887-917.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1998. "Deep Hanging Out." *The New York Review*.
- Haas, Peter M. 1992. "Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination." *International Organization* 46 (1):1-35.
- Haastrup, Toni, and Jamie J. Hagen. 2021. "Racial hierarchies of knowledge production in the Women, Peace and Security agenda." *Critical Studies on Security* 9 (1):27-30. doi: 10.1080/21624887.2021.1904192.
- Heras-Sevilla, Davinia, Delfin Ortega-Sánchez, and Mariano Rubia-Avi. 2021. "Coeducation and Citizenship: A Study on Initial Teacher Training in Sexual Equality and Diversity." *Sustainability* 13 (9):5233.
- Holvikivi, Aiko. 2021. "Training the Troops on Gender: The Making of a Transnational Practice." *International Peacekeeping* 28 (2):175-199. doi: 10.1080/13533312.2020.1869540.
- Holvikivi, Aiko. 2023. "Contending with Paradox: Feminist Investments in Gender Training." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 48 (3):533-555. doi: 10.1086/723268.
- Hopkins, Johns. 2025. "Center for Humanitarian Health." <https://hopkinshumanitarianhealth.org/>.
- Keck, Margaret E., and Kathryn Sikkink. 2014. *Activists beyond Borders : Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Kennedy, David. 2008. *The Dark Sides of Virtue : Reassessing International Humanitarianism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Khan, Fatima, Cecile Sackeyfio, and Liliya Paraketsova. 2020. "Refugee women as victims of intimate partner violence : forever vulnerable?" *Acta Juridica* 2020 (1):227-265.
- Li, Tania. 2007. *The will to improve : governmentality, development, and the practice of politics*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- McLindon, Elizabeth, Renee Fiolet, and Kelsey Hegarty. 2021. "Is Gender-Based Violence a Neglected Area of Education and Training? An Analysis of Current Developments and Future Directions." In *Understanding Gender-Based Violence: An Essential Textbook for Nurses, Healthcare Professionals and Social Workers*, edited by Caroline Bradbury-Jones and Louise Isham, 15-30. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Merry, Sally Engle. 2021. *The Seductions of Quantification : Measuring Human Rights, Gender Violence, and Sex Trafficking*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Michelis, Ilaria, Jane Makepeace, and Chen Reis. 2025. "Who Is Centered in the Humanitarian Response to Gender-Based Violence? A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Survivor-Centered Approach." *Violence Against Women* 31 (6-7):1514-1535. doi: 10.1177/10778012241231783.
- MOSAIC. 2024. Training: Using a Trauma-Informed Approach in Data Collection. edited by PrEP Watch.
- Mukhopadhyay, Maitrayee, Franz Wong, Tropen Koninklijk Instituut voor de, and G. B. Oxfam. 2007. *Revisiting gender training : the making and remaking of gender knowledge : a global sourcebook, Gender, society & development*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands, Oxford, U.K.: KIT Publishers ; Oxfam Publishing.
- Nair, Deepak. 2021. "'Hanging Out' while Studying 'Up': Doing Ethnographic Fieldwork in International Relations." *International Studies Review* 23 (4):1300-1327. doi: 10.1093/isr/viab001.
- Porter, F., and I. Smyth. 1998. "Gender training for development practitioners: only a partial solution." *Gender and development* 6 (2):59-64.
- Pring, Jamie. 2023. "Analysing the divide between technocrats and diplomats in international organizations." *International Affairs* 99 (5):1995-2014. doi: 10.1093/ia/iiaad185.
- Prügl, Elisabeth. 2023. "Gender as a cause of violent conflict." *International Affairs* 99 (5):1885-1902. doi: 10.1093/ia/iiaad184.
- Puechguirbal, Nadine. 2003. "Gender Training for Peacekeepers: Lessons from the DRC." *International Peacekeeping* 10 (4):113-128. doi: 10.1080/13533310308559352.
- Rohingya Refugee Response. 2025. Gender-Based Violence: Key figures 2025. Dhaka, Bangladesh: Rohingya Refugee Response
- Sen, Udit. 2020. *Citizen refugee : forging the indian nation after partition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press.
- Sikkink, Kathryn. 2011. *The justice cascade : how human rights prosecutions are changing world politics*. 1st ed. ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.
- UNHCR. 2024. Fact Sheet: UNHCR Syria Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Prevention and Response. UHNCR.
- UNHCR. 2025a. Annual Results Report: Bangladesh. Geneva: UNHCR.
- UNHCR. 2025b. Annual Results Report: Jordan. Geneva: UNHCR.
- Vu, A., A. Adam, A. Wirtz, K. Pham, L. Rubenstein, N. Glass, C. Beyrer, and S. Singh. 2014. "The Prevalence of Sexual Violence among Female Refugees in Complex Humanitarian Emergencies: a Systematic Review and Meta-analysis." *PLoS Curr* 6. doi: 10.1371/currents.dis.835f10778fd80ae031aac12d3b533ca7.