

GENDER ALERT - 11 OCT 2024



VOICES OF WOMEN: FIRST RESPONDENTS TO THE BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA FLOODING AND LANDSLIDE CRISIS

Centering gender specific needs and priorities in the flood and landslide response in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Photo: UN Women BiH/Edita Miftari

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this Gender Alert is to capture the initial messages and perspectives conveyed by women-led organizations and women leaders operating in the flood affected areas and/or actively involved in responding to the flooding and landslide crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina and provide an overview of gendered impacts of the crisis and the differentiated needs of women, men, girls, and boys. This Gender Alert was prepared by UN Women Country Office in Bosnia and Herzegovina one week after the crisis and is based on information, data and testimonies shared during this timeframe. It also reflects the information and reports of the Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Civilian Protection Services, and Red Cross Society of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The information presented in this Gender Alert is not exhaustive; its primary purpose is to provide an insight into the current situation of affected communities and emphasize their specific needs from a gender and diversity perspective. As the situation continues to evolve and more data becomes available, a more in-depth analysis will be provided and made available to government, international and civil society partners to support and further inform post-disaster needs assessments.

CRISIS OVERVIEW

Amid the intense floods that hit Bosnia and Herzegovina, during the night of 3-4 October 2024, a flood wave struck the areas of Jablanica, Konjic, Kiseljak, Fojnica, and Kreševo, causing significant material damage and triggering landslides that resulted in human casualties.

Available data shows that 23 people¹ have lost their lives² – 17 in Jablanica, 3 in Konjic and 3 in Fojnica, while several people are considered missing, and the number of deceased and missing persons is not final. The rescue operations are ongoing. The number of affected households exceeds 1,133, while dozens of residential buildings have been completely destroyed.

The most severe situation has been recorded in Jablanica, particularly in the localities of Donja Jablanica, Zlate, and Buturović Polje in Konjic, where parts of the settlements have been completely destroyed. Following the first crisis, an orange alert has been issued due to the risk of heavy rainfall, flash floods, and landslides, leading to evacuation of 463 people in Konjic and Jablanica on the evening of 8 October 2024.³ Flash floods have also affected parts of Drvar, but without consequences that would require a humanitarian response.⁴ There have been disruptions in road and railway communication, telephone networks (both landline and mobile), and the isolation of certain settlements due to water or landslides on the roads.

RESPONSE OVERVIEW

On 4 October 2024, the Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina requested the activation of the Copernicus satellite system from the Emergency Response Coordination Center of the General Directorate for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations. This request aimed to obtain satellite imaging of areas affected by floods and landslides. Concurrently, the Federation of BiH declared a state of natural disaster, effective until further notice. The BiH Ministry of Defense activated the BiH Armed Forces, with EUFOR providing support for rescue operations.

By order of the Federal Headquarters of Civil Protection of the Federation of BiH, all protection and rescue services in the Federation have mobilized human and material resources to operate in the affected areas. The Society of Red Cross of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina has organized collection points for assistance and 206 staff and volunteers are providing support in affected areas.⁵ The Federal Ministry of Transport and Communications has been tasked with ensuring the accessibility of road and rail communications in the affected areas. Additionally, the Federal Ministry of Interior has increased the number of patrol vehicles and surveillance on roadways in these regions. The public company BH Telecom is prioritizing the establishment of a stable communication network in areas impacted by floods and landslides.



Photo: Municipalities affected by 4 October floods and landslides (Source: Red Cross Society of BiH)

IMMEDIATE IMPACT ON WOMEN AND GIRLS – KEY MESSAGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Women and girls are disproportionately affected by the flooding due to pre-existing vulnerabilities and gender roles. Preliminary consultations held by UN Women between 4 and 8 October 2024 with 10 representatives of women-led organizations, local Red Cross volunteers, local women leaders and residents of central and southern Bosnia and Herzegovina confirmed the need for urgent support to local communities, especially women and girls who were affected by the floods and landslides. To ensure a gender-responsive approach to the flood and landslides response, the following areas require urgent attention:

Housing and living conditions

In the most affected areas where structural damages have made many homes inhabitable, there is an urgent need for safe spaces with easy access to clean water and safe sanitation facilities, as they are crucial for providing both physical and emotional security. The lack of these facilities can leave women and girls vulnerable, compromising their privacy and dignity.

Still, many affected residents are accommodated with their relatives, which can have both positive and negative implications. On one hand, staying with relatives can provide a sense of community, emotional support, and immediate shelter. On the other hand, overcrowding can limit privacy and strain resources, leading to inadequate access to clean water, sanitation, and essential services. This can exacerbate health risks and reduce overall well-being. Additionally, the uncertainty of the situation may necessitate considering longer-term solutions in the medium term. The mental health implications of this uncertainty are also significant, as prolonged displacement and lack of stability can increase stress and anxiety among the affected population.

“The situation is changing hour by hour, and so are the needs. This makes it difficult to coordinate support. Evacuated families are mostly accommodated with relatives, even though we have collective accommodations ready for the displaced population,” said a women’s organization representative from **Jablanica**.

She further elaborated: *“I asked for help to get barrels for 1,000 liters of water each. By the time the procedure was completed and barrels arrived, they have already established a temporary water supply system over a length of 10 kilometers. So, sometimes our responses are delayed due to these administrative problems or complications.”*

Women’s organizations have reported that many residents of affected areas chose to remain in their partially habitable homes and are intensively engaging in cleaning their living and outdoor areas. Floodwaters often contain harmful bacteria and viruses, leading to waterborne diseases, and women who are often responsible for collecting water, cleaning and caring for sick family members, are at higher risk of exposure. Feedback from a female resident of **Fojnica** highlights the urgent need for cleaning tools such as large brushes with handles, brooms, and disinfectants. Making their homes habitable again is crucial for restoring a sense of normalcy and stability for their families.

Economic impact

Many women, especially those working in informal sectors or agriculture, have lost their livelihoods due to the destruction of crops and local businesses. This economic instability can lead to increased poverty and reduced access to essential services.

“That night, the water woke us up. My husband and I went up to the first floor because the ground floor was completely flooded. We were rescued, but aside from the damage to our house, we lost our chickens, which were very important for our livelihood,” shared a resident from **Buturović Polje (Konjic)**. A women’s organization representative from **Konjic** clarified that *“a vast majority of affected women were unemployed and sustaining themselves through agriculture before the floods and now they have lost everything. The crops from Buturović Polje used to feed the entire Konjic.”*

These accounts underscore the devastating impact of the floods on household economies and local communities and the urgent need for targeted economic support, including cash assistance due to the fact that many affected people have lost their personal documents, including IDs, bank cards, health insurance cards, diplomas and other documents necessary for economic stability and well-being.

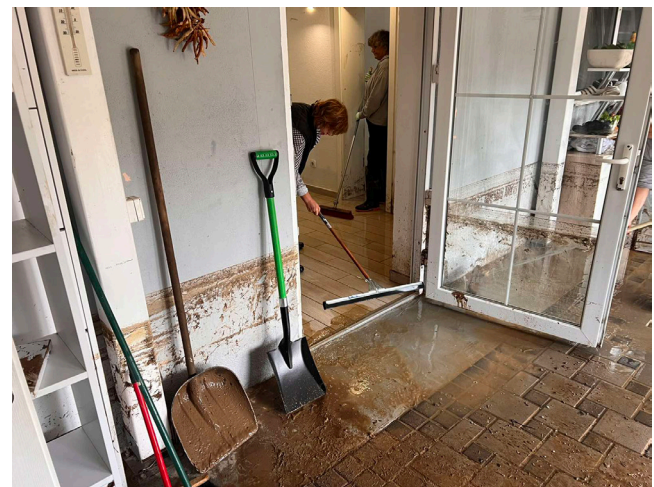


Photo: UN Women BiH/Edita Mitfari

The local population in Pločari Polje, a village near Fojnica, mobilizes to clean heavily affected homes which were flooded on 3-4 October 2024.

“The circulation of cash is invisible. A woman comes to you, she has some salary, maybe she even worked somewhere, but she has lost her ID card, a bank card. She practically doesn’t exist in the system. How will she get her money from the bank? There is no government measure for that. If she needs medicine that has to be bought, where will that money come from? In crisis situations, the problem is always cash, which unfortunately never arrives. [...] People send me money through Western Union. These are my friends who know that I have been helping people here for years. But no organization could ever legally have that money immediately available at that moment. Even during the war, money meant something. Whoever has money has bread,” elaborated a women’s organization representative from **Konjic**.

A resident from **Konjic** who financially supports her elderly father and whose home was destroyed shared that she expects to pay 200 to 300 BAM for reissuance of her university diploma and additional 200 BAM for expedited reissuance of her passport to be able to start a new job abroad that she got days prior to the floods. As there are no known protocols in place to simplify this process in case of natural disasters, the procedure for reissuance of lost documents can be lengthy and expensive, negatively impacting affected individuals even further.⁶

Providing direct cash assistance and livelihood opportunities to women, particularly those who are primary providers for their families, is therefore essential and can help them rebuild their lives, but also contribute to the economic recovery of their communities. In parallel, it is critical that the government prioritizes the urgent issuance of lost or damaged documents under simplified procedures, as many individuals currently lack access to essential services due to the absence of these vital documents.

Promoting women's access to decent work and childcare and elderly care facilities is also a major priority. According to the UN Women Baseline Study on the Care Economy in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 68.6% of respondents are not using childcare services, and 60% oppose the idea of moving their parents or in-laws into elderly homes.⁷ Furthermore, 46.7% of women report spending 10 hours weekly on elderly care. These burdens will be exacerbated following the catastrophic floods, as the increased need for care and support will further strain the already disproportionate care responsibilities shouldered by women.

Water, sanitation and essential services

Food and non-food items are being delivered by the government and organizations on the ground, including women's organizations who have been at the forefront of assistance efforts; however, the needs are great and evolving, and additional support and coordination is required.

Access to clean drinking water is critical in the aftermath of the floods – restoring water supply networks and providing or reconstructing sanitation facilities are essential steps to ensure public health and safety. Access to hygienic supplies, including menstrual hygiene products, sanitary items, baby and adult diapers, and clean and unused underwear are also critical. These measures are particularly important for the safety and dignity of women and girls, as they reduce the risk of gender-based violence and harassment and allow women and girls to manage their menstrual hygiene with privacy and dignity, which is often overlooked in emergency response efforts.

This crisis is causing extreme distress and will have deep psychological effects. Due to the intense stress, there have been reports of girls experiencing their first menstrual periods earlier than expected, as noted by a woman leader from **Jablanica**:

“Urgently, urgently we need underwear for girls and teenage girls, and of course sanitary pads. Many girls have started their periods due to stress.” A representative of a women's organization in **Konjic** has raised the issue of lack of emphatic response during reception at assistance checkpoints: *“The women are now under extreme stress. I know how people would come to the checkpoints and how they would be received. Name and surname, whether their house is demolished, what is most necessary for them? No, people cannot be received like that. We lack women volunteers who have truly undergone training. We lack genuine feminists, women connected with other women, to be able to receive these women properly. They do not have to be professional psychologists, but they need to have the sensitivity to receive them.”*

The Red Cross Society of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina has established a hotline for psychological first aid (060 302 5556) for all residents of the affected communities who need psychological first aid – from 5 to 10 October, this hotline has responded to 40 telephone calls.⁸ A women's organization representative from **Jablanica** stated: *“We currently have many healthcare workers who have come to support us from Banja Luka, Mostar, and Sarajevo. As for psychological support, the Mental Health Center does not have the capacity to support the entire population, which is in great need of psychological assistance.”* An activist from **Konjic** confirmed a similar situation, emphasizing a lack of psychological support in general, especially during a crisis such as this one, underlining also a necessity to form mobile teams that would visit families in the field.



Photo: E.Z./INI BIH

Floods with human casualties and enormous material damage hit parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina on 3-4 October 2024. The local population affected is cleaning their homes, which have been destroyed by water, as well as mud and silt.

The floods have created a critical need for mobile health units to provide basic medicines, maternal health services, reproductive healthcare and psychological support to address the specific needs of women and girls in remote areas. Hygiene kits and the distribution of nutritious food are vital, particularly for persons with chronic illness, pregnant and lactating women, to support their health and that of their children. Reports from all affected areas highlight the urgent need for specialized psychological assistance, including in the medium to long term. Frontline workers dealing with the crisis, who are often women, also require psychological support.

While there have been no reported cases of gender-based violence (GBV) in the affected areas, it is important to recognize that such incidents are often underreported, especially in the aftermath of disasters. Learning from other humanitarian crises, it can be anticipated that the GBV rates might increase due to the loss of livelihoods, overcrowded conditions, and psychological distress. Disruption of services may also hinder the ability of survivors to report incidents. Therefore, information sharing and scaling up of GBV mitigation, prevention, and response services are crucial.

Notable is also a critical gap in the ongoing support for chronic patients, which can have gender-specific implications. Women, who often bear the primary responsibility for caregiving within families, may face additional burdens in ensuring that their loved ones receive necessary medical care. This can exacerbate their stress and limit their ability to access other essential services.

“Volunteers successfully rescued people who were on hemodialysis. They carried them out along forest paths. However, at this moment, no one is thinking about whether we will soon need medications, as there are many chronic patients,” reported a resident from **Konjic**. Insufficient attention to the continuous medical needs of chronic patients can disproportionately affect women, who are more likely to suffer from chronic conditions and may have less access to healthcare resources. Ensuring that medical supplies and medications are available and accessible is crucial to addressing these gender-specific vulnerabilities and supporting the overall health and well-being of affected communities.



Photo: Red Cross Society of FBiH

Young female volunteers are mobilizing in the field to deliver essential aid to communities affected by the recent flooding.

Role of women in disaster response

Local organizations, including women-led and women’s rights organizations, have actively mobilized and are offering critical support to affected communities. Representatives of women’s organizations have stressed the need to ensure women are engaged in crisis management and emergency response, as a lesson learned from previous crises.

“We have women volunteers in the Mountain Rescue Service (GSS), but as far as I know, women are not present in other units like the fire department or civil protection,” said a representative from **Jablanica**. Similarly, a women’s organization representative from **Konjic** observed, *“As far as I’ve noticed, we have a lot of girl volunteers. The girls have come to save us. Merhamet prepares food, and numerous volunteers then distribute it to the affected families.”* This highlights the significant role women play in providing essential services during disasters.

Reflections from the field further point out the scarcity of women in rescue teams, which can significantly impact the effectiveness and sensitivity of rescue operations, especially when assisting women from rural areas who may adhere to traditional dress codes and experience heightened fear and trauma when rescued by male-only teams. This underscores the need for gender-sensitive approaches in rescue operations to minimize additional psychological distress.

“We have only a few women in the rescue services. We rescue women, for example, from rural areas who have never undressed in front of a man or who wear traditional clothing like ‘dimije’ [traditional pants] and scarves. These women cannot be rescued solely by men. Their fear is even greater because it is night, and only men are present [...] when women talk about how they left that area, they talk about the moment when the rescuers arrived, getting to a safer location, and all this still falls under the description of a major trauma. I think we have greatly neglected the importance and role of women in rescue services and that there are too few of them. GSS Konjic, they have only four women. These women have never received support to buy equipment or anything, they manage on their own,” noted a representative of women’s organization from **Konjic**.

This recount also highlights the lack of support and resources for the few women who are part of the rescue services, which can hinder their effectiveness and discourage more women from joining these critical roles. The absence of women rescuers and the resulting trauma can have long-term effects on the mental health and well-being of the women affected by the floods. Ensuring gender-balanced rescue teams can help address these issues more effectively.

Women are also mobilizing in their personal capacities to provide support to families affected by the floods, primarily by assisting with the cleanup efforts. In **Luke (Fojnica)**, a local women’s association has mobilized 15 women to clear the scattered debris by hand as heavy machinery was more needed elsewhere. Many of these women have neglected their less affected homes to support their neighbors in need. *“We currently have 15 active women, but it is usually around 20. With everything that happened, women are exhausted and terrified, especially elderly women. Significant funding is being collected through the Catholic Church and I have requested to participate in the damage assessments to be able to know and advocate for the affected women. When women are not involved, they easily get neglected – when they were assessing the damages on my home, I wasn’t even aware of it, no one informed me”*, reported a women’s association representative from **Luke (Fojnica)**.

Despite women’s active participation, pervasive social norms around gender roles persist. A respondent from **Dusina (Fojnica)** indicated a clear gender division of labor in the aftermath of the floods: *“Tasks are divided between men and women; women are inside the houses, cleaning, while men are outside.”*

In this sense, men are more likely to exchange information with friends, neighbors, and relatives during these activities, and this division of labor is confining women to their homes, limiting their direct access to relevant information about available relief and recovery services. As a result, there is a significant risk that women and other vulnerable groups may not receive timely and accurate information or assistance through accessible channels. Ensuring that information about services is disseminated in ways that reach women directly is crucial to addressing their specific needs and ensuring their safety and well-being.

To sustain the delivery of emergency assistance, additional resources are urgently needed. Engaging local civil society organizations, especially those led by women, in immediate and post-disaster needs assessments is essential to better understand the evolving needs and priorities of those most at risk, including women and girls, persons with disabilities, and marginalized groups.⁹



Photo: UN Women BiH/Edita Miftari

Volunteers are supporting local communities to clear the scattered debris and dispose of destroyed household items.

Endnotes:

- ¹ To date, sex disaggregated data is not available.
- ² Daily Report on the Activities of the Red Cross Society of BiH on 10.10.2024.
- ³ Daily Report on the Activities of the Red Cross Society of BiH on 09.10.2024.
- ⁴ Daily Report on the Activities of the Red Cross Society of BiH on 07.10.2024.
- ⁵ Daily Report on the Activities of the Red Cross Society of BiH on 10.10.2024.
- ⁶ Lost or damaged documents need to be reported to the police, the issuance of new documents needs to be requested, and the documents need to be declared invalid in the Official Gazette, except for ID cards. Administrative fees for reissuance of the key ID documents (ID card, driver’s license, passport) can go up to 150 BAM, even 400 BAM if the request is urgent. Source: Ministry of Interior of Herzegovina-Neretva Canton – [Izgubili ste dokument? Šta uraditi – MUP HNK, Za građanstvo – MUP HNK](#)
- ⁷ Full study available here: [Baseline Study on Care Economy - Overview of Key Denominators, Policy and Programming Options | UN Women Bosnia and Herzegovina](#)
- ⁸ To date, sex disaggregated data is not available.
- ⁹ UN Women will be leading the Rapid Gender Assessment in October and November 2024, in collaboration with UNFPA and IOM, and will be informing any upcoming inter-agency assessment.

Contact persons:

Edita Miftari, edita.miftari@unwomen.org
 Maja Tursunović, maja.tursunovic@unwomen.org