



# no Woman's Land

Jaberi Dance Theatre

Photo of: Irma Villafuerte & Nickeshia Garrick

## Artist Statement

Performance art has great capacity to reveal and communicate what can sometimes be indescribable through words. This ability to excavate what is hidden and connect on a human level is what has compelled me to use my art thoughtfully and with purpose, to speak about the issues that matter to me.

The recent stories of refugees that have been unfolding in real time, have left an imprint on me. I felt a deep connection to the experiences that I was reading about and the images that were flooding my screen. I wanted to discover who they were and what their journey was like before arriving to Canada. Not only did these experiences trigger my own memories of displacement and war, but they reminded me of the incredible capacity for human resilience in the face of adversity. I was humbled by the strength and courage of the women in particular, who not only survived the difficulties of forced migration but overcame the injustices of violence.

I wanted to create a work that highlighted the women at the heart of these stories. I knew I needed to learn more in order to capture their experiences respectfully and authentically, so I connected with community researcher/artist Doris Rajan (IRIS-The Institute for Research and Development on Inclusion and Society) and scholar/activist Dr. Shahrzad Mojab (The University of Toronto) to help guide my research. Rajan provided more insight on the issue of violence against marginalized women and advised me on how to translate the research artistically. Dr. Mojab's expertise on violence against women pushed me to look at the complexity of the issue to better understand the deeply entrenched systems of oppression that have created the refugee crisis.

Transferring this research to performers has its challenges, especially when there are no personal experiences to draw from. What anchored us during the creative process was returning to the women's stories. These women have survived great adversity, yet many come out stronger and determined to live a life worth living. As privileged witnesses, we need to shift the focus of our discomfort to hearing their difficult stories and appreciating their courage to share them.

Further, it is important for us to challenge our ideas of viewership —ideas that are largely shaped by Eurocentric values— and open ourselves up to different ways of viewing and interpreting art that occur in other parts of the world. I believe that racialized people, particularly those coming from war and conflict regions, need not downplay or censor their experiences to make it more palatable for the dominant culture to view.

No Woman's Land understands that the art form of dance does not offer solutions to tackle complex, historically entrenched systems of oppression; however, the project team believes that dance can be a powerful tool to reveal the nuances in often concealed experiences.

-Roshanak Jaberi

## The Refugee Woman

Whether women trying to flee acute starvation and poverty, natural disaster, armed conflict and war, or they live in the refugee camps, they face the threat of sexual violence. Reports indicate that approximately one in five refugee women experience sexual violence.

In the research for this production on the experiences of women in refugee camps, we found that there is no safe space for women and girls. The boys and men in the camps and the 'peacekeeping' troops and/or policemen in charge of securing the camps, are among the perpetrators. Women in our research told us how both the old and new colonial system destroyed communities and families and incited wars in their homelands. They talked about the use of sexual violence as a tool for ethnic cleansing and genocide where rape is systematic and gang rape far too often a reality. Everyday life means a shortage of food, the fear of using the toilets or sleeping for fear of being robbed or attacked. Some women talked about how they endured horrific torture and were fearful of speaking up. Sexual violence, or 'survival' sex, can be an option in exchange for the chance of a faster and shorter route out of the anguish of refugee camps. Some Syrian women have reported that they would rather return to Syria, where they risk death than to endure the ongoing sexual violence in the camps.

Yet the women we spoke to made it clear that their lived experiences have resulted in shrewd strategizing skills, fierce and cunning independence, strong and at times fearless aggression. All painting a picture quite contrary to the passive, helpless victim characterization that we associate with the refugee woman. We were told about the strength that is required to get the basics things needed to live, such as food and water for themselves and their children. We heard about the love for their children, some who were born on route or in the camps and how they tried to create the conditions to live a 'normal' life wherever they were. Women set up 'schools' in camps where they taught each other and their children. We even heard one story of women organizing a drama workshop in their camp, where they enacted their stories in support and communion with one another. We were told of some women who chose to fight and go back to join the 'rebels', while others wrote songs about the revolution. Women also shared how they would find a private space where they would gossip, sing, laugh and dream together.

It is within this complexity and broader context that we as researchers, artists and activists understand and playback the stories that unfold in No Woman's Land.

### TOTAL FORCED DISPLACEMENT

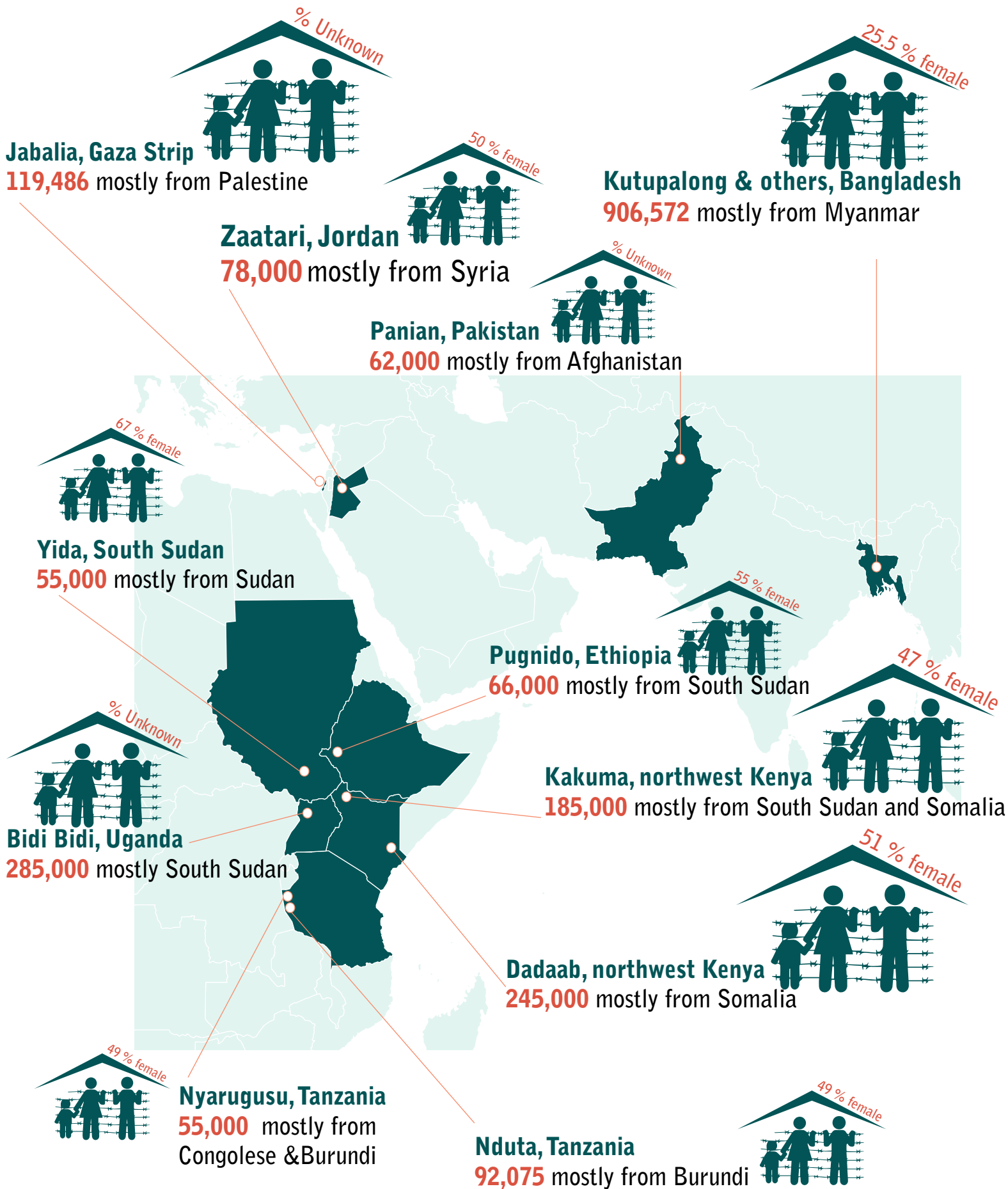
**68.5 million**

people around the world have been  
**forced** from home:

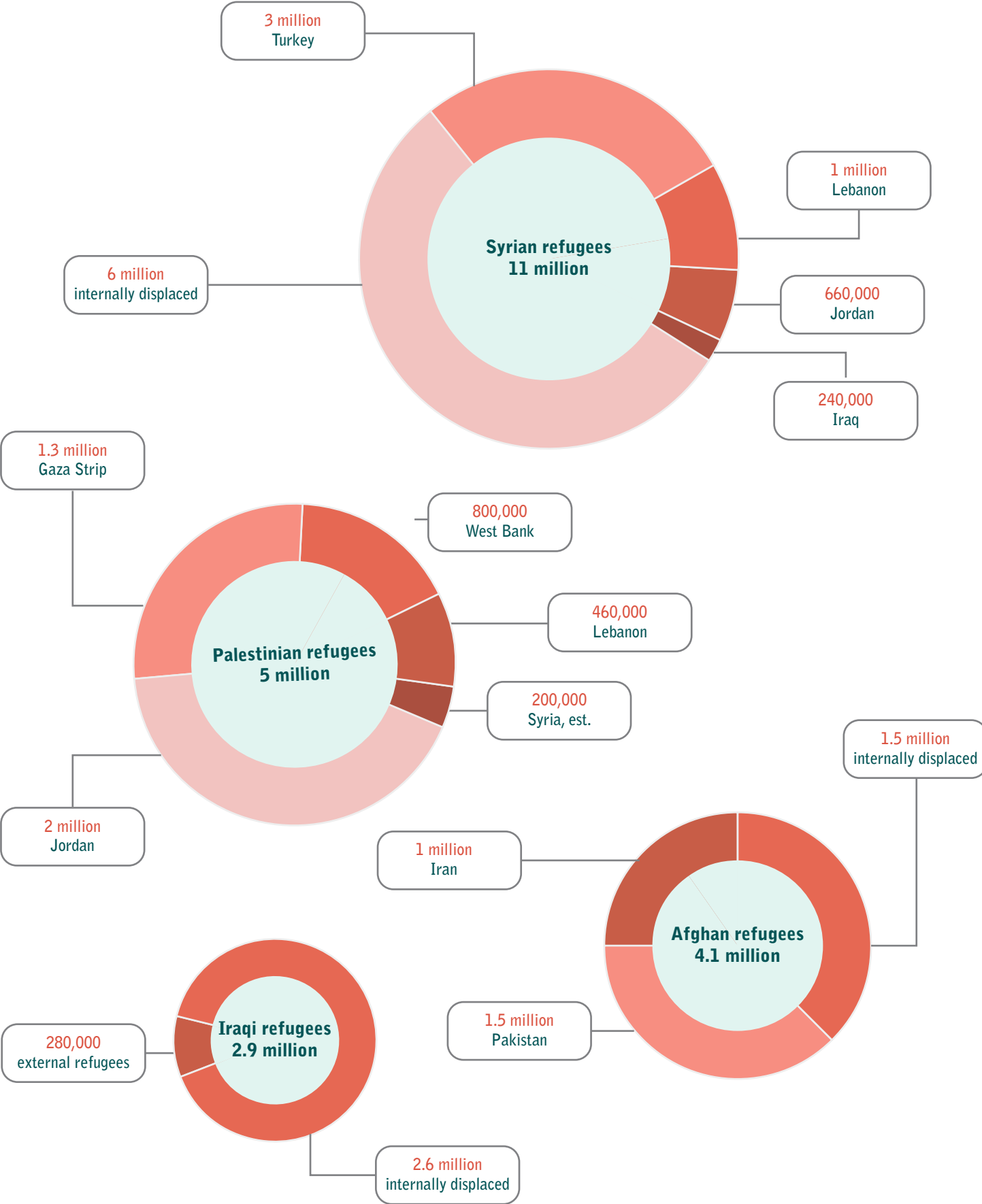
**1 person is forcibly displaced  
every two seconds.**



## Largest refugee camps\*

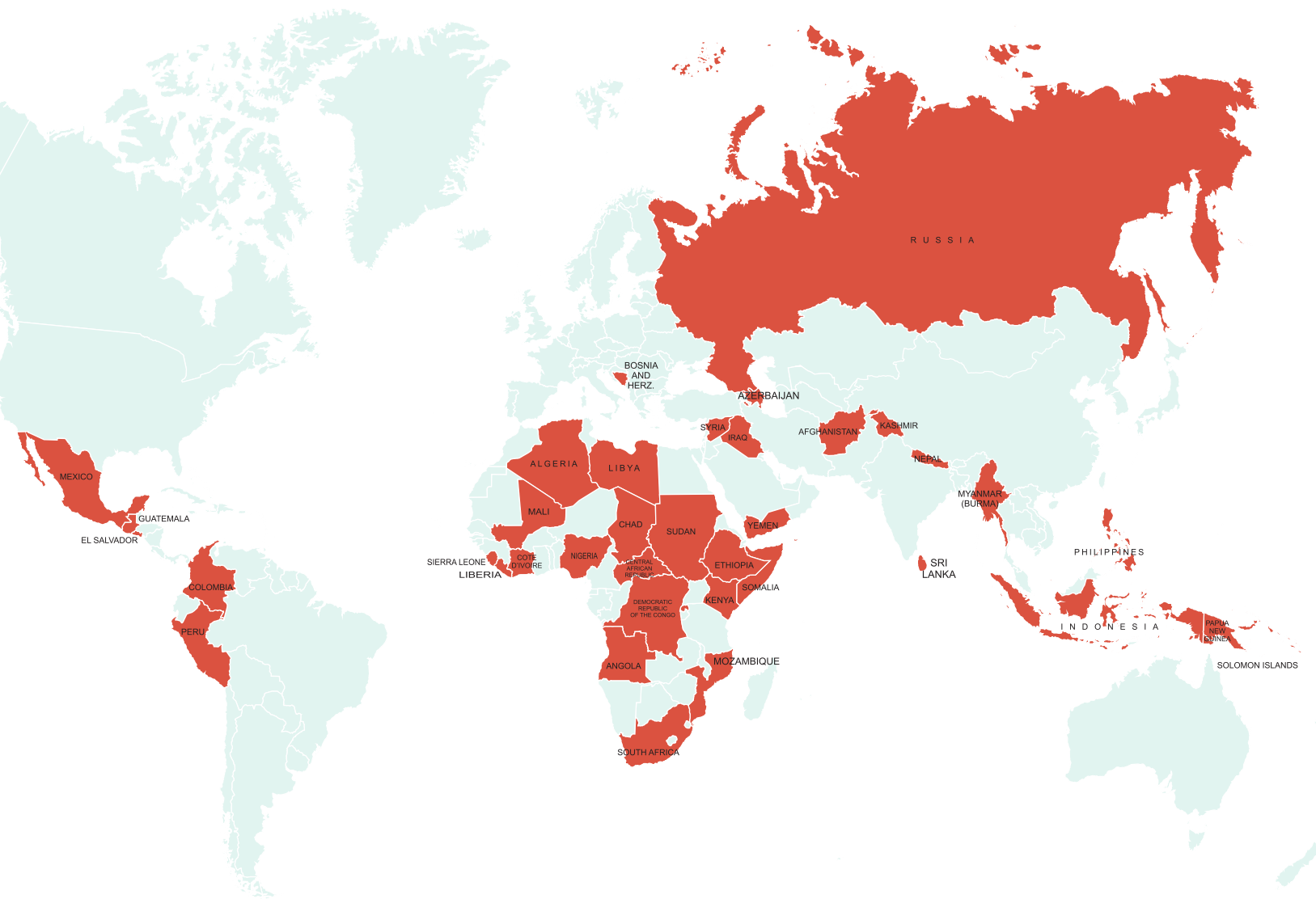


Largest refugee populations\*



## Rape in war zones\*

Systematic or widespread rape of women  
by soldiers/paramilitaries as part of armed conflict  
1990s–2018, where known



### REFERENCES

\*The visuals are drawn from:

Seager, J. (2018). *The Penguin Atlas of Women in the World*. New York: Penguin Books. p 31 ,52.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). *Figures at a Glance*.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2018). *Population Factsheet*.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). *Jabalia Camp*.

The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) (2019). *Tanzania Refugee Situation Statistical Report*.

## Learn More

### Agencies

Across Boundaries: An Ethno-Racial Mental Health Centre  
Afghan Women's Organization  
Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture  
Canadian Council for Refugees  
Ethiopian Association in the Greater Toronto Area and Surrounding Regions  
La Passerelle-Intégration et Développement  
Lifeline Syria  
New Canadians Centre: Peterborough-Cobourg  
Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI)  
Parkdale Legal Clinic  
Rexdale Women's Centre  
Riverdale Immigrant Women's Centre  
Sojourn house  
Somali Canadian Women and Children Association  
South Asian Legal Clinic  
The 519: Newcomer & Refugee Programs - Advancing LGBTQ Human Rights  
University Settlement House  
Vasantham: A Tamil Wellness Centre

### Recent Research & Reports

Academic Council on the United Nations System (2018). *Femicide: Contemporary Forms of Enslavement of Women & Girls*. ACUNS: Vienna Liaison Office Tenth Edition.

Altai Consulting (2015). *Migration Trends Across the Mediterranean: Connecting the Dots*. International Organization for Migration - Middle East and North Africa Region.

Birchall, J. (2016). *Gender, Age and Migration: An Extended Briefing*. BRIDGE, UK: Institute of Development Studies.

Freedman, J. (2016). *Sexual and Gender-based Violence against Refugee Women: A Hidden Aspect of the Refugee "Crisis."* Reproductive Health Matters, 24 (47): 18-26.

Global Women's Institute (2018). *Intersections of Violence against Women and Girls with State-building and Peace-building: Lessons from Nepal, Sierra Leone and South Sudan*. The George Washington University.

Mazlumder Women Studies Group (2014). *The Report on Syrian Women Refugees Living out of the Camps*.

Mazlumder - Association for Human Rights and Solidarity for the Oppressed.

Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants and Barbara Schlifer (2018). *#UsToo: A Call to Action Meeting the Needs of Migrant and Racialized Communities in Anti-gender-based Violence Work in Ontario*.

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## Funders

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Toronto Arts Council

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