

Four Walls and a Future: How Shelter Transforms Lives

Stories of Strength and Survival from CARE International Projects August 2025

Around the world, more and more people are losing the place they once called home.War, floods, cyclones, and economic collapse are forcing families to leave behind everything familiar,often more than once. According to UNHCR and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2023 and 2024 saw the highest levels of global displacement ever recorded, with over 120 million people uprooted by conflict, disasters, and instability.

Yet even as the need for support grows, shelter remains one of the most underfunded areas of humanitarian aid.

But shelter is more than just a roof. It's the ability to close a door, to have walls that gives privacy, to offer children a place to sleep, learn, and feel safe again. Without it, families face greater risks from exposure to illness, to violence and uncertainty.

This collection brings together stories from communities facing displacement in Gaza, Sudan, Northwest Syria, Ukraine, and Vanuatu. It also highlights the voices of women leading shelter responses: engineers, specialists, and community leaders who are shaping shelter solutions in some of the world's most challenging contexts. Through these stories, we see how shelter can restore not only safety, but also agency, leadership, and hope.

In each place, CARE and its partners are working with communities to support shelter solutions that are adapted to local needs, responsive to the climate, and grounded in tradition.

Because when disaster strikes, shelter isn't just a structure, it's a lifeline.

In Gaza, shelter is survival.
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Amid the rubble of destroyed homes, everyone faces the reality of loss—and the urgent need for shelter: CARE Palestine 2024

In Gaza, shelter is survival.

Military operations in Gaza have displaced much of the population, forcing families to flee multiple times, often with nothing. Today, hundreds of thousands are living in overcrowded schools, damaged buildings, makeshift tents, or out in the open.

“The shelter situation in Gaza is beyond dire,” says Saaed, CARE’s Deputy Area Manager. “With each wave of displacement, families are forced to rebuild their lives with fewer resources and less hope.”

Shelter isn’t just about staying dry, it’s about dignity, safety, and mental well-being. In overcrowded informal shelters, women and girls face increased risks of gender-based violence. Children struggle with trauma, unable to find a safe space to rest or play. The elderly suffer from limited access to privacy, proper bedding, and medical care

Saaed recalls meeting a woman in Deir Al Balah who had been displaced eight times. She was living under plastic sheets supported by wooden sticks, with no privacy or protection.
"She told me, ‘I just want walls for my children,’" he says. Her words reflect the deep emotional toll and the urgent need for dignified shelter solutions.

Short-term options like tarpaulins or tents provide some relief, but they don’t hold up for long in Gaza’s tough conditions. What’s needed now are shelter solutions that are stronger, safer, and suitable for longer-term use—places that offer privacy, protection from the elements, and a sense of stability.
Despite everything, people in Gaza continue to adapt, salvaging materials, repurposing buildings, and doing what they can to create makeshift homes.

“The resilience of people here is inspiring,” says Saaed. “But even these options are becoming harder to sustain.”
As the crisis deepens, one thing is clear: shelter must remain a priority. It’s the first step toward safety, health, and recovery. And through voices like Saaed’s, we’re reminded that people in Gaza are not asking for much, just four walls, a roof, and the chance to live in dignity once again.



Nothing but rubble and a bit of hope: CARE Palestine 2024

Sheltering Dignity in Sudan: Why Local, Climate-Smart Solutions Matter

Sudan: More Than Displacement

In Sudan, over 12 million people urgently need shelter. But the crisis runs deeper than displacement alone. Families are caught in the middle of armed conflict, economic hardship, and the breakdown of essential services—all while lacking a safe place to live. For many, schools, damaged buildings, tents, or open fields have become their only options.

Muda's Story: Searching for Safety

One such story is Muda's. A mother who fled Khartoum when the fighting intensified, she and her children moved through several states, often sleeping under trees and hiding from violence. They eventually reached a crowded shelter site in Port Sudan.
"She found temporary shelter, which provided some relief but was still far from adequate," says Jalal, Deputy Area Manager for CARE in Sudan. "Despite overcrowding and insufficient spacing, the shelter gave her family a place to regroup and start rebuilding."
The shelter wasn't ideal, it lacked privacy, sanitation, and stability. But for Muda and many others, even a simple structure meant a safer space to rest and recover.



In Sudan, people have lost everything: CARE Sudan, 2024

The Double Burden of Climate and Conflict

Sudan's climate adds a punishing layer to an already dire situation. Extreme heat, dust storms, and seasonal floods make inadequate shelter not just uncomfortable, but dangerous—especially for children, the elderly, and women.

"Without proper shelter, people are exposed to extreme weather, violence, and exploitation," Jalal explains. "It's not just about having a roof, it's about protection, dignity, and survival."



Durable, climate-smart shelter solution in Sudan: CARE Sudan 2024

Local Approaches That Work

To respond to these challenges, CARE and its partners are using more locally sourced and climate-smart shelter solutions. Stabilised soil blocks and designs that suit the local environment can improve insulation, speed up construction, and reduce environmental impact. These approaches also help involve the community, creating jobs and building local skills.
"These solutions offer immediate relief and also empower communities to rebuild sustainably," says Jalal.

A Step Toward Recovery

Muda's experience is one of many in Sudan. Her story shows how shelter, even when basic, can be a turning point. With the right support, shelter becomes more than a place to stay, it's a first step towards recovery and rebuilding.

Three Women, One Mission: Dignified Shelter for All

Jamila: From Displacement to Purpose in Syria

"I am a woman. I am displaced. And I once dreamed of safety, stability, and privacy," says Jamila Abdulkareem, a shelter and WASH consultant in NW Syria. Her own experience with displacement shapes how she approaches her work today.

"It became my duty to the women of Syria," she says. "I work with love and commitment to technical standards. I've played a role in improving many lives, especially those of women and children who simply dream of living in dignity and safety."

Jamila understands the risks of inadequate shelter—early marriage, child labour, and violence. She's also seen how simple improvements can make a big difference: helping mothers return to work and children go back to school.



Jamila in the field: CARE Northwest Syria, 2024



Jinan in the field: CARE Lebanon 2024

Jinan: Empowering Women Through Shelter in Lebanon

In Lebanon, Jinan El-Houmayra, a shelter PM with CARE, sees how shelter can be a turning point, especially for women facing poverty, displacement, and insecurity.

Many families live in unfinished or overcrowded buildings. "While the walls may be standing," Jinan says, "the lack of safety, privacy, and basic infrastructure often renders these spaces deeply undignified, especially for women."

"When women are engaged in the shelter process, from budgeting to maintaining their homes, they gain confidence," she explains. "They begin to advocate for their needs, and that changes their relationship with their environment."

In one project, after basic home repairs, a woman told Jinan:
"Now I can finally focus on my children's education instead of worrying about flooding or broken windows."

That moment stayed with her. "It's not just physical," Jinan says. "It's emotional, and it's empowering."

For her, integrating protection principles into shelter work is key—making sure improvements support women's well-being, safety, and leadership at home.

Susan: Engineering Dignity in Northwest Syria

Susan Vefai, an engineer with CARE's partner Shafak, has led shelter responses after earthquakes and conflict. She also contributes to national shelter guidelines through the Shelter Cluster.

"Shelter is a fundamental human need," she says. "It's about safety, dignity, and stability. Once shelter is in place, all other sectors, health, education, protection can build around it."

Susan is especially passionate about empowering women through shelter, particularly through cash assistance that lets them repair or rebuild their homes themselves.

"It became my duty to the women of Syria," she says. "I work with love and commitment to technical standards. I've played a role in improving many lives, especially those of women and children who simply dream of living in dignity and safety."



Susan's Favourite Project: CARE Northwest Syria 2024

Vanuatu: Rebuilding Shelter, Restoring Control

After Tropical Cyclone Lola hit the island of Pentecost in 2023, homes were destroyed, trees were uprooted, and families were left to pick up the pieces. For one mother, the cyclone didn't just take her house, it took away her sense of safety.

With nowhere else to go, she and her children took shelter under a tarpaulin, tied down with rope and branches. Every gust of wind kept her on edge.

"I just want to keep them safe," she said. "When it rains, I stay awake all night, wondering if the tarp will hold."

Many families in remote parts of Vanuatu face similar challenges. While traditional homes are part of local culture, they often cannot withstand stronger cyclones or earthquakes. Recovery is made harder by limited access to materials, tough weather conditions, and repeated disasters.

When she received an emergency shelter toolkit and support from CARE, things changed. She was able to rebuild a stronger shelter, and with it, her confidence.

"Now I can sleep peacefully," she said. "I feel in control again." The shelter gave her more than protection. It brought back a sense of security and the ability to care for her children without fear.



Children playing outside their house: CARE Vanuatu 2024



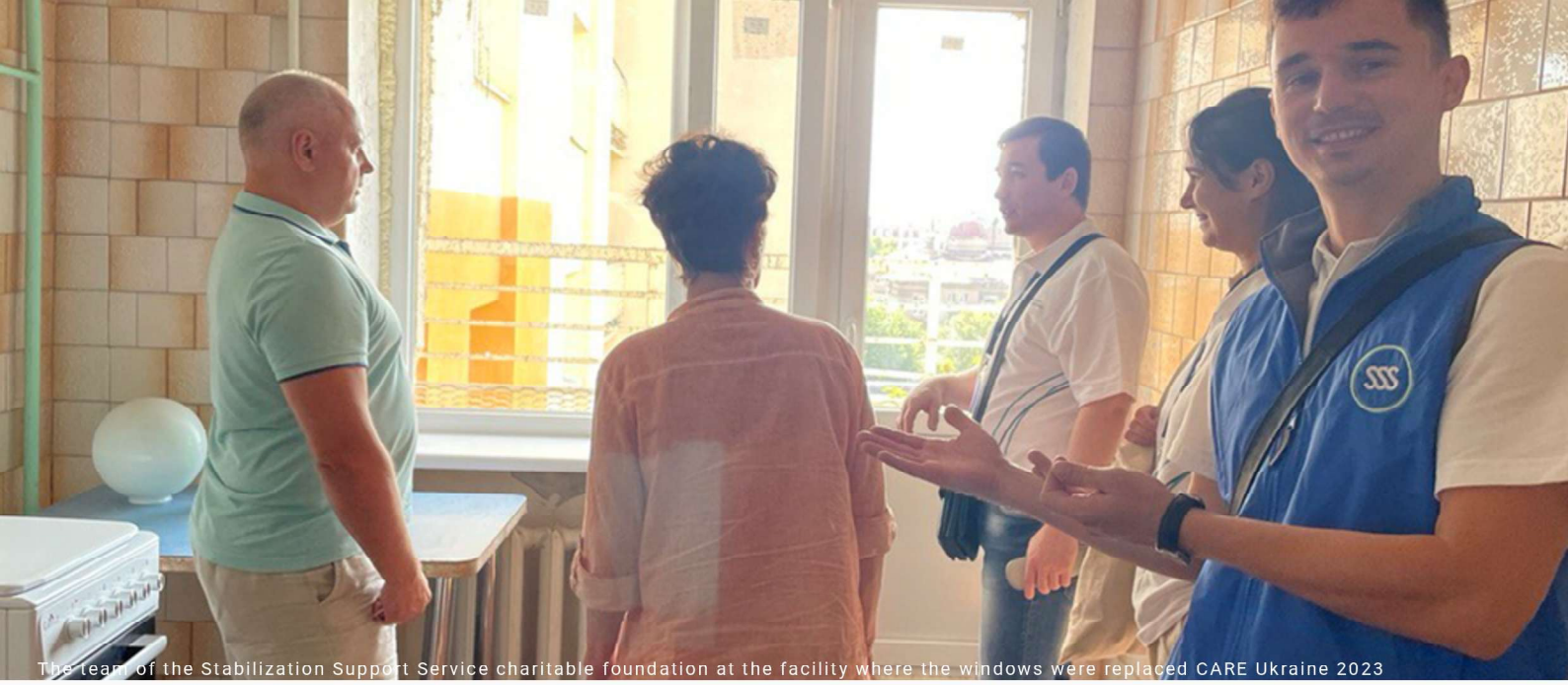
With shelter awareness and local hardwood, we can builtd a stronger and safer home: CARE Vanuatu 2024

Community-Led Design That Works

What really helped was not just the materials, but the approach. CARE worked with local leaders to combine traditional Ni-Vanuatu knowledge with cyclone-resistant design. These hybrid shelters respect cultural practices and are much more resilient.
By training local builders, including women, and supporting shelter focal points in disaster committees, CARE helped communities take charge of their own recovery. Pre-positioned materials and local know-how are now helping people prepare and respond faster when disasters strike.

More Than a Roof

In Vanuatu, where cyclones, earthquakes, and storms are common, shelter is more than just a building. It's a space to rest, a shield against fear, and a sign of strength.
And for one mother in Pentecost, it meant something very personal: the return of control.

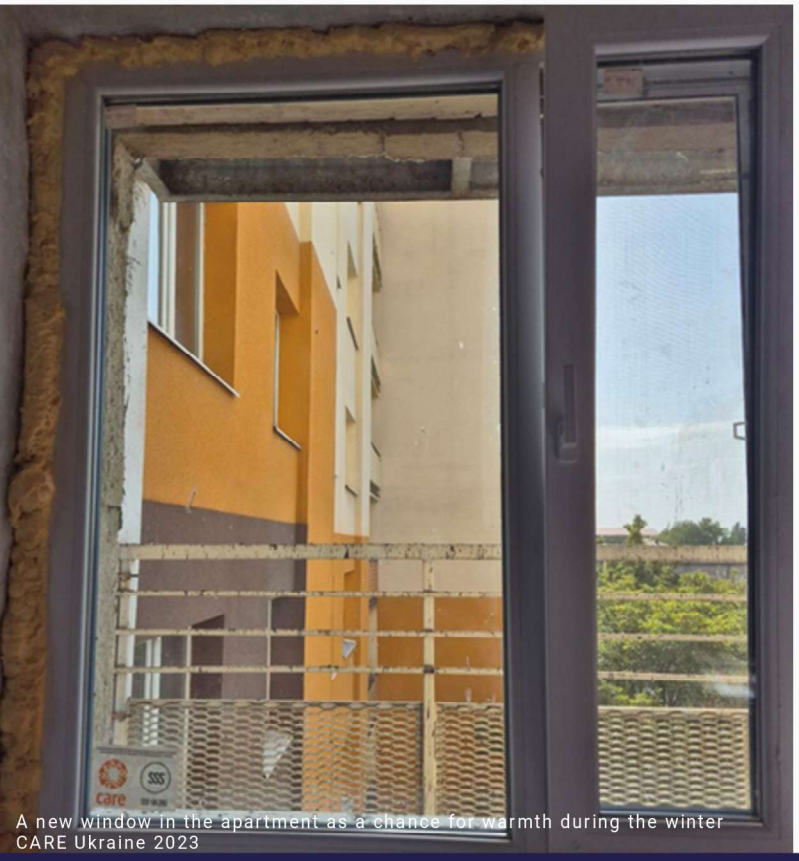


The team of the Stabilization Support Service charitable foundation at the facility where the windows were replaced CARE Ukraine 2023

Window of Hope: A Grandmother's Fight to Keep Warm and Keep Going in Ukraine

In a modest apartment in Kherson, 72-year-old Halyna (name changed for security reasons) opens the door with quiet strength. In her kitchen, a local team from Stabilization Support Services, a Ukrainian charity supported by CARE, measures the frame for a new window. It will be the third one installed since the war began.

In a city where shelling happens almost daily, this may seem like a small task. But for Halyna, it means a lot, especially with another cold winter on the way.



A new window in the apartment as a chance for warmth during the winter CARE Ukraine 2023

Help Arrives: Light Repairs, Big Impact

Preparing for winter is a constant concern.

"I replaced the first window with the help of a neighbour," Halyna explains. "But I can't repair the second one on my own. I really hope for support from your organisation."

A window may seem simple, but for Halyna, it's protection from the cold, and a sign that she is not alone. It offers not just warmth, but also hope.

Her story is one of many in Ukraine, each one showing how people are enduring the daily toll of war. Though she chose to stay anonymous, her words reflect the experience of many others, quiet strength, persistence, and the will to carry on.

"I Must Live for Him"

Standing in her kitchen, watching the team finish their work, Halyna says: "I just want our apartment to be warm. I must live for my grandson."

Shelter as Survival

In conflict-affected areas, shelter is about more than just bricks and windows. It's about safety, survival, and having something to hold on to for the future.

For Halyna and others like her, these small repairs can mean everything.



Rabab stands in front of her tent: CARE Northwest Syria 2022



Rabab stands in front of her new shelter: CARE Northwest Syria 2022

Northwest Syria: From a Tent to a Home

Life in a Tent

In Ein Al Abeed camp, Northwest Syria, Rabab, a widow and mother of two, lived in a tent for years. Displaced by conflict, and mourning the loss of her husband and one of her children, she did her best to care for her surviving kids under fragile canvas.

“The tent was the kitchen, the bathroom, the living room, and the bedroom,” Rabab said. “There was no privacy, no place to shower. Life was very tiring.”
The tent offered little protection. It flooded during rain and tore apart in strong winds.

“One night, the mattress was soaked. We woke up in water. I shouted for help,” she recalled. “Another time, I watched my tent get uprooted and thrown away by the wind.”

There was no lock, no structure, and no sense of safety. Tents had to be replaced every year, something Rabab could no longer afford. Day-to-day survival took over everything else.

A Home

Things changed when CARE built new shelter units for Rabab and 73 other families.

Each unit was 30 m², with two rooms, a kitchen, a private toilet, and a secure door, giving families the safety and privacy they had long lacked.

“Here, I can lock the door and finally feel safe,” Rabab said. “It’s cleaner, quieter, and my children can study now.”

Her family now lives in a more stable and dignified home, close to relatives. It hasn’t just improved their living space, it has helped them start to heal.

“I’m grateful for this shelter,” she said. “It has changed our lives.”



Rabab and her children inside the new shelter: CARE Northwest Syria 2022



Final Reflections: What Will We Build Next?

Across every crisis,conflict, disaster, displacement, one quiet question keeps coming up:
How will we live now?

It's not just about surviving. It's about having control, feeling safe, and living with dignity. This question comes up during the worst moments, but it stays long after the emergency, shaping how people rebuild their lives.

What these stories show is that shelter is connected to everything: protection, health, education, mental well-being, and livelihoods. Yet despite its importance, shelter is often delayed or underfunded—when it should be the starting point for recovery.

To respond better, our approach needs to adapt. Emergency shelter should consider what comes next. Designs must work with the climate, culture, and the way people live. And above all, people, not just buildings, must remain at the centre of every decision.

As needs grow and challenges multiply, we'll keep sharing stories like these, stories that show not just what was built, but how it changed lives.

Because in the end, this isn't just about structures.

- Will we build something that simply gets people through the day, or something that helps them move forward?
- Will we settle for temporary fixes, or invest in long-term recovery?
- Will we see shelter as just a roof, or as the first step toward regaining control, safety, and dignity?

The answer lies in how we choose to act, and who we choose to listen to.

What will we build next, and who will we build it for?

