

# Women-led organisations in humanitarian response

Number 85 June 2024

## Humanitarian Exchange



**HPN**  
Humanitarian  
Practice Network



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Issue 85 June 2024

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## About HPN

The Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN) at ODI is an independent forum where field workers, managers and policy-makers in the humanitarian sector share information, analysis and experience. The views and opinions expressed in HPN's publications do not necessarily state or reflect those of the Humanitarian Policy Group or ODI.

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## Contents

- 6**  
**Is the localisation agenda working for women-led organisations?**  
Angelina Nyajima
- 
- 9**  
**Who will listen to the women of Gaza?**  
Nadia Al Bakri
- 
- 13**  
**Women with disabilities leading humanitarian action**  
Veronica Ngum Ndi
- 
- 17**  
**Women-led organisations' response to the Ukraine crisis**  
Iryna Trokhym
- 
- 20**  
**The unmet need for women-led organisation access to direct humanitarian funding**  
Jeanne Frangieh
- 
- 25**  
**Transitioning from face-to-face to remote capacity-sharing among women-led organisations in Afghanistan**  
Zarqa Yaftali
- 
- 29**  
**Women-led organisation engagement and influence in the Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence**  
Claudine Tsongo
- 
- 33**  
**Women-led organisations and feminist foreign policy in Colombia**  
Erika Veloza Martinez
- 
- 37**  
**Why does the humanitarian system continue to ignore the indigenous knowledge of women-led organisations?**  
Dr Renu Adhikari
- 
- 42**  
**Women-led initiatives in the Middle East and North Africa**  
Layla Naffa
-

**46**

**Creating space for gender in the Grand Bargain and the humanitarian system**

Naomi Tulay-Solanke

**49**

**Women-led organisations responding across the nexus in the Venezuela crisis**

Beatriz Borges

**54**

**Tackling threats and violence against women-led organisations**

Oumou Salif Touré

**58**

**Cultivating psychological safety: fostering better partnerships with women-led organisations**

Maria Luisa Ramirez



Dr Renu Adhikari addresses women's rights at a mass picketing in Nepal. © WOREC Archive

# Editorial

This edition of the *Humanitarian Exchange*, ‘Women-led organisations in humanitarian response’, is the first to be co-edited by an Editorial Committee of women-led organisations (WLOs). Focusing on the work of WLOs in humanitarian response, this issue was developed by a six-person editorial team: Claudine Tsongo, Erika Veloza Martinez, Joe Read, Dr Renu Adhikari, Wesal Abdullah and Zarqa Yaftali, supported by the HPN interim coordinator, Kerrie Holloway, and HPG Senior Research Fellow, Megan Daigle.

Historically, women have played pivotal roles in community resilience and recovery during times of crisis. Yet, their leadership has often been overlooked or undervalued in formal humanitarian structures. With recent policy commitments to increase engagement with WLOs in their efforts to address humanitarian crises and promote sustainable development, many donors have pledged to prioritise funding for WLOs, advancing women’s leadership and supporting women’s participation in peacebuilding and conflict-resolution efforts. In particular, much attention has been paid to ‘building’ the organisational capacity of WLOs to effectively respond to humanitarian crises, through technical assistance, training and mentorship programmes. Relatively little focus has been given to capacity exchange between WLOs and international actors, and there is a sobering lack of evidence regarding the impact of internationally led and designed initiatives. Much of the resources invested by donors in the name of WLOs goes to overhead costs of international humanitarian agencies picked by donors, instead of WLOs, to work with them.

Reflecting on these circumstances, the WLO contributors to this edition share their own experiences of structural obstacles to greater WLO leadership in the humanitarian sector and offer a critical examination of key issues and trends drawn from their work. In her article on the unequal benefits of localisation, **Angelina Nyajima** writes about the marginalisation of WLOs within the localisation agenda, sharing her experiences in South Sudan. **Nadia Al Bakri** asks, ‘Who will listen to the women of Gaza?’ in her article on the work of WLOs in Gaza before and during the Gaza genocide. **Veronica Ngum Ndi** writes of her experience as a woman with a disability leading an organisation working in humanitarian response, and the importance of shifting attitudes within the humanitarian workforce to respect the capability and agency of organisations led by women with disabilities. **Iryna Trokhym** explains the pivot of established WLOs in western Ukraine to respond to the humanitarian needs of women and girls following the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022, and the importance of organisations resisting pressure from humanitarian donors to move away from their original missions. **Jeanne Frangieh** advocates for direct funding of WLOs by donors, by looking at the challenges experienced by WLOs in the ‘starvation cycle’ of project funding without indirect cost support.

By breaking down institutional barriers and advocating for inclusive policies, WLOs make considerable contributions to representation and participation of women at all levels of decision-making. In her article on the impact of the restrictions imposed by the Taliban, **Zarqa Yaftali** explains how Afghan WLOs have embraced online modalities in their work, including remote capacity-sharing initiatives. In the first of

two case studies on WLO engagement in global humanitarian platforms in this issue, **Claudine Tsongo** shares her organisation's experience as the first WLO to become a signatory to the Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies, and considers the benefits to all stakeholders from WLO engagement in global decision-making structures. In her article on WLO engagement in Colombia's feminist foreign policy, **Erika Veloza Martinez** writes about the contributions of WLOs as important actors in policy implementation. **Dr Renu Adhikari** argues for greater consideration of the indigenous knowledge of women-led organisations in her study of the potential contributions of indigenous knowledge to humanitarian response. Prioritising inclusivity and local agency is essential to understanding the unique needs and vulnerabilities of diverse communities. By amplifying the voices of women and marginalised groups, WLOs are working to foster sustainable solutions that address root causes and promote long-term resilience to humanitarian crises.

Women leaders bring a distinctive approach to coordination and network-building for cross-border and regional humanitarian response. Characterised by collaboration, solidarity and consideration of the gamut of social, cultural and economic drivers of vulnerability in conflict, WLO-led initiatives emphasise listening, consensus-building and nurturing relationships, which are essential in navigating the complexities of humanitarian emergencies. By fostering a culture of trust and cooperation, WLOs foster innovation and adaptability, enabling more effective responses to evolving challenges. In her article about the WLO-led regional initiatives in the Middle East and North Africa region, **Layla Naffa** advocates for humanitarian platforms to engage with regional networks. In the second case study on WLO engagement in global platforms, **Naomi Tulay-Solanke** shares her experience with the Grand Bargain, and details the progress made by the Friends of Gender group, led by two WLOs. Ahead of the Venezuelan presidential election in July 2024, **Beatriz Borges** highlights the work of Venezuelan WLOs working across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus to respond to the needs of women and girls in the Venezuela regional crisis, and the capacity-sharing work undertaken by Venezuelan WLOs such as Centro de Justicia y Paz (Center for Justice and Peace or CEPAZ), with WLOs working under authoritarian regimes in the region. **Oumou Salif Touré** shares the disturbing reality of threats and harassment faced by WLOs in her article about the impact of the anti-rights agenda on feminists advocating for gender equality, reproductive rights, and legal protections from gender-based violence. Finally, **Maria Luisa Ramirez** advocates for greater attention to psychological safety as a strategy to support strong and resilient WLOs in the humanitarian sector.

# Women-led organisations in humanitarian response

Is the localisation agenda working for women-led organisations?

**Angelina Nyajima**



Angelina Nyajima briefs the UN Security Council as a Civil Society Delegate in 2019. Credit: Angelina Nyajima

The unequal benefits of localisation to different types of national actors in the humanitarian sector is an issue that concerns many humanitarian actors, perhaps none more so than women-led organisations (WLOs). Women's issues go unnoticed because the localisation platform is not available to them. As Executive Director of Hope Restoration South Sudan, I know this all too well. In humanitarian settings, we WLOs have to form our own networks and make our voices heard, often defying cultural norms about women's roles. We pursue agendas that challenge traditional structures, cultures and ways of working, which are essential to bringing aid to the women and girls who need it most.

It is in this context that civil society organisations and WLOs across South Sudan work tirelessly to deliver critical lifesaving services to hard-to-reach communities. We can do this because we employ local staff: we work throughout the rainy season, and we stay and deliver to our communities even when the

fighting is going on around us. However, we struggle to operate when we lack the necessary resources to carry out our work and to continue to provide these lifesaving services to our communities, who have suffered from decades of conflict. In South Sudan today, there is intense competition between international and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for humanitarian resources. The bulk of the funding goes to United Nations (UN) agencies and international NGOs, and the smallest portion to national NGOs. Within national civil society, by far the smallest portion of funding goes to WLOs.

## **Women-led organisation experiences of localisation**

For many WLOs, the localisation agenda has contributed further barriers to our painstaking efforts to build equal partnerships and direct relationships with international donors and agencies. As men-led national organisations have increased their operational capacity and resource base through localisation structures, they too often become additional tiers between WLOs working at community level and the international actors that we seek to coordinate and partner with to scale our programming and influence humanitarian decision-making. Though localisation broadly aims to empower local actors and institutions in humanitarian settings, the simplistic application of policies by organisations with a checklist to demonstrate progress toward localisation has been counterproductive.

In South Sudan, we see international agencies flock to a small number of national NGOs that already work with another international agency, instead of pursuing partnerships with local NGOs in their target areas, working in the relevant sector. The clustering of international agencies around well-established national NGOs that have met the due diligence requirements of an international NGO or UN agency actually entrenches the unequal power relationships within the humanitarian system that were the original focus of the localisation agenda.

There are several ways in which WLOs have been excluded from the benefits of localisation. Firstly, gender bias and discrimination within the humanitarian system is almost as pervasive as international bias. WLOs are overlooked as humanitarian actors or dismissed as ‘development actors’ due to our unwillingness to ignore the root causes of risks and vulnerabilities facing women and girls in emergency settings. WLOs have had to fight for recognition as contributors to humanitarian policy discussions, and have been undervalued in humanitarian decision-making processes at both national and global levels. Stereotypes and perceptions about women’s leadership abilities, caring responsibilities, and ironically, assumptions about cultural barriers, further perpetuate exclusionary practices; in South Sudan, we see this especially at the state and county levels. This leads to limited representation and participation of WLOs in humanitarian coordination mechanisms, partnerships and networks that shape both localisation dialogues and humanitarian response, which in turn, further diminishes the visibility and influence of WLOs in shaping policies and practices.

This is further entrenched by the barriers faced by WLOs in accessing the funding, resources and capacity-building that enable participation in coordination, planning, decision-making and policy

dialogues in the humanitarian system. We see across diverse contexts that WLOs' lack of access to indirect cost support hinders their ability to participate in and benefit from localisation initiatives and approaches that are intended to address these same challenges.

## **Reimagining the balance of power**

Power imbalances within the humanitarian sector cannot be described simply as 'local versus international'. The same structures that privilege international perspectives, education and technical knowledge also prop up other kinds of unequal power dynamics that entrench bias, whether based on ethnic identity, language, religion, gender, etc. The colonial mindset that underpins the humanitarian system not only favours international actors, but also those who can be most easily compared to international actors, which often means the elites. Whether elite status is based on education, location in the capital city, English language skills, or experience working as national staff for international organisations, we see the confluence of these different elite characteristics in the national NGOs with the most success in finding a place at the table of localisation.

The objective of WLOs is not to become the elites, but to point out and address the power imbalances that localisation efforts have so far been based on. Targets that measure progress based on percentage reduction for international actors at the same time as percentage increase for national actors would never be able to measure change on the ground from localisation policies, whether positive or negative, because the system of cause and effect is not so simple. If the real intention of localisation initiatives is to more effectively address the needs of affected communities during an emergency, then the logical starting point is not just to reduce the concentration of power among international actors, but amongst any kind of actors separate from affected communities. Smaller and more specialised local actors like WLOs are able to be effective humanitarian actors because they are not elites, they are from the community. If this effectiveness is what we want from the humanitarian system, the only option is to deconstruct the power imbalances that keep decision-making furthest away from local communities.

## **Conclusion**

Support to WLOs to strategise and to design humanitarian interventions and the resources to reinforce our own initiatives is the only sure-fire way to show how WLO-led humanitarian response works differently. We need not just to be consulted, but also to lead. If WLOs are only used as implementers for delivery of services to women and girls designed by UN and INGO teams, there will never be a leap forward in effectiveness or efficiency of humanitarian response to the unique needs of women and girls. The perception of collaboration between WLOs and other actors as focused on strengthening the capacity of only WLOs, instead of strengthening the effectiveness and responsiveness of humanitarian assistance in total, is a very significant stumbling block preventing progress being made.

Too much of the localisation discussion still presents local actors as contributing insights and experience to internationally owned and operated top-down humanitarian responses, instead of more collaborative locally led and designed responses which fully utilise the skills, knowledge and capacity of



local actors. In the case of WLOs, reconfiguring humanitarian decision-making structures to allow for local leadership by WLOs is key to strengthening the effectiveness of humanitarian response in the near term, and to transitioning between different phases of the humanitarian–development nexus beyond the emergency phase.

**Angelina Nyajima** is Executive Director of Hope Restoration South Sudan.

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## Who will listen to the women of Gaza?

**Nadia Al Bakri**



A woman carries firewood through the central Gaza Strip (June 2024). Credit: Anas-Mohammed/Shutterstock

Gaza has been subjected to violent occupation with frequent escalations into acute conflict over the past two decades. Before 7 October 2023, 80% of the population had been dependent upon humanitarian assistance. Women-led organisations (WLOs) such as the Women’s Affairs Technical Committee (WATC) in northern Gaza, have played a vital role in providing essential services and humanitarian assistance. Working to address the specific challenges faced by women in Gaza, WLOs have been key contributors to humanitarian response in Gaza for several decades and also play a crucial role in advancing women’s rights, resilience and empowerment. The existence of WLOs has time and again enabled women to mobilise to respond to the needs of their communities during conflict, providing assistance to people who are displaced. Since 1992, WATC has provided humanitarian assistance to

women and girls in northern Gaza, including access to essential services, psychosocial support, and protection from violence and exploitation. Like the multiple other WLOs providing humanitarian assistance, especially in the gender-based violence (GBV) sector, WATC is an integrated part of communities across northern Gaza and has been disastrously affected by the war.

## The catastrophic effects of the ongoing violence

In November I moved south in Gaza, with my mother, husband and son, to my previous home, Rafah. The Rafah that I found upon arrival was in dire straits. It is now one of ‘the most densely populated places’ in the world, and ‘has an infrastructure intended for one sixth of its population’. An estimated nearly 1 million women and girls have been displaced since 7 October. Women, children and newborns in Gaza are disproportionately bearing the burden of the escalation of hostilities, both as casualties and due to reduced access to health services, as reported by most United Nations (UN) agencies operating in the Gaza Strip. The Rafah crossing to Egypt is closed and over 800,000 people have been forced into the Khan Younis and Deir el-Balah governorates. There is an ongoing severe shortage of sufficient water, food, medicine and other basic items and services despite the chronic needs of the 1.7 million displaced. There is an imminent risk of famine. Of all people facing famine or severe hunger globally, 80% are Palestinians in Gaza. Lack of clean water has led to an increase in people suffering from maladies such as hepatitis due to infected water and poor hygiene conditions. The available water supply is estimated by UNRWA to be less than one litre per capita per day.

The impact of the violence on women and girls cannot be underestimated. They are unable to bathe on even a weekly basis and are deprived of menstrual health management items. In some shelters, the wait to use one of the few toilet facilities can take up to 16 hours. The destruction of the market chain and commercial sector has created a huge gap in available supplies to meet the basic needs of women and girls. Furthermore and most disastrously, the physical and social pressures created by overcrowding are compounding GBV risks, and extreme overcrowding increases risks for intimate partner violence and GBV.

Communities have been forcibly displaced due to Israeli evacuation orders without items necessary for survival, and as they move to seek safety and shelter, every new wave of displacement consolidates the ever-increasing concentration of displaced people. Further displacements eradicate the spontaneous networks that women establish to support their families while they attempt to cope with each round of upheaval. The scale of the conflict has a multidimensional impact on all people in Gaza, with very significant risks for women and girls. In a survey from March 2024, 51% of surveyed women have lost at least one family member and at least 3,000 women are estimated to be widowed. As the primary caretakers in most families, women face first-hand the long-term consequences of the devastating psychological impact of intergenerational trauma for entire families in Gaza, and of the impact on their health and safety due to the lack of clean water and sanitation services, shelter, homes, hospitals and treatment.

Women and girl survivors of GBV have very limited opportunities to access life-saving support services as there has been a total collapse in GBV referral pathways. The two women’s safe houses run by WLOs

in Gaza have been destroyed due to bombardment. Child marriage has increased within shelters, and incidents of sexual violence continue to rise with no safe shelter available. GBV survivors who face an immediate threat of life by their abuser have nowhere to go.

## **Women-led organisations working amid the chaos**

Many WLO staff, volunteers and project participants were among those forcibly displaced from northern Gaza to Rafah in autumn 2023. Following the bombardment of Gaza City, I had to abandon my home to seek medical assistance for my mother, leaving behind the remains of the bombed WATC offices, the destroyed legacy of three decades of work. During previous crises, WATC research and documentation on issues affecting women in Gaza, including GBV and access to healthcare, have served as a basis for evidence-based advocacy and policy interventions related to humanitarian conditions for civilians in Gaza, but our work on monitoring and documentation during this war has taken second place to the urgent need for lifesaving interventions for women and girls.

Despite our attempts to continue working with Gazan women's organisations to facilitate capacity-sharing and referral pathways during the first months of the war, and to support the active participation of WLOs in humanitarian decision-making processes, this has been nearly impossible due to the destruction of communication infrastructure. In addition, the lack of water and electricity supply, the mass destruction of civilian homes and infrastructure, and denial of access for humanitarian goods or staff make it impossible for us to deliver urgently needed aid to vulnerable communities in northern Gaza. New restrictions have compounded the impacts of a 17-year blockade that has severely limited imports of food, fuel and medicine.

While WLOs are trying their utmost to resume services, the destruction of safe houses and the very limited supplies into Gaza make this almost impossible. Due to displacement, WLOs and other GBV service providers continuously need to relocate and reestablish response locations. The **collapse** of the health system also means the loss of lifesaving GBV and sexual and reproductive health services, and the toppling of the civilian policing and judicial structures means there is nowhere to report cases. WATC continues to work to foster collaboration and networking among WLOs, civil society groups, international organisations, donor agencies, and human rights bodies, but our impact is limited due to the low levels of connectivity between displaced staff and casework.

During near-constant emergency conditions, WLOs in Gaza have looked after the most vulnerable members of the community, caring for pregnant women and older people, offering counselling for trauma survivors, advocating for people with disabilities, and providing advice on women's safety. While WLOs are doing their utmost to maintain programming, our buildings, vehicles and essential supplies have been destroyed. Bombardment, destruction and displacement have reduced WLOs to working out of makeshift accommodation with minimal electricity, restricting communications and making it challenging for WLOs to continue operations beyond monitoring conditions, psychosocial support, case management and connecting with old cases. Providing specialised programming is difficult due to the breakdown of referral pathways and the disruption of case management due to displacement.

## **Women-led organisations in Gaza need urgent support**

While in Rafah, I used local connections and long-term relationships with partners and networks in the areas of displacement to mobilise assistance for vulnerable households. What I was able to do was small in comparison to the pre-war work of my organisation, but in the face of severe need I did what I could. Women's capacity, knowledge and networks are essential to helping Gazans cope, and WLOs have been a key enabling factor for women's leadership in humanitarian action in Gaza for more than two decades, contributing immeasurably to resilience, empowerment and social change despite the challenges posed by the ongoing conflict and occupation. During the frenzy of work to re-establish minimum programming and restore contact with caseloads, we continue to fear that vulnerable households will be displaced yet again in the face of full incursion into Rafah. More than **1 million** people have been further displaced since the start of the Israeli ground operation in Rafah on 6 May 2024.

Today in Rafah, Khan Younis and Deir el-Balah, women play an important role in coordinating within crisis-affected communities, assessing needs, trying to build referral pathways between services, and providing basic support to vulnerable community members. With the collapse of Gaza's 'humanitarian system' and forcible mass displacement of its population, decades of work by WLOs have been eroded and WLO leaders, staff and volunteers have had to abandon their work while fleeing for their lives. WLOs have witnessed specific risks first-hand: insufficient and unreliable aid, distributed under conditions of insecurity that do not allow adequate targeting, exposing vulnerable groups to violence, exploitation and abuse, trafficking and forced prostitution, including by aid workers. The work of WLOs in Gaza has always included advocacy for policies and reforms that protect women's rights in Gaza, to address the causes of violence against women and girls. In the present situation, that advocacy is aimed at international humanitarian decision-makers and donors to bring to light the scale of risk to women and girls in current humanitarian operations. We have been calling for the donor community to prioritise GBV as a lifesaving service and scale up resources for GBV prevention, response, and risk mitigation, including direct support to WLOs, and will continue to do so.

## **The exclusion of women-led organisations in leadership**

While women in Gaza have been at the forefront of providing essential care and support to their communities, the depth and extent of women's leadership have gone largely unrecognised and undervalued by humanitarian actors. Women in Gaza have faced systemic barriers that marginalise their contributions and limit their ability to shape humanitarian response. Within the international humanitarian response in Gaza, women's contributions have been overlooked, undermined and undervalued, relegated to 'feminine' roles such as care-taking, further limiting women's access to leadership. UN-led responses to acute and protracted crises in Gaza have perpetuated power imbalances and sidelined women from decision-making processes, undermining the effectiveness of humanitarian efforts and further entrenching gender inequality in humanitarian leadership. This exclusion has limited the effectiveness of response by failing to address the specific needs of women and vulnerable populations.

The exclusion of women from formal leadership and decision-making roles within humanitarian efforts has repeatedly been a theme of internationally coordinated response in Gaza, and the lack of inclusion of WLOs in the design and implementation of emergency response has resulted in less effective programming. International organisations have appointed men to manage operations and control resources, despite overwhelming evidence that humanitarian actors can better address the multifaceted needs of populations affected by crisis by embracing the collective expertise and resilience of women. Furthermore, international humanitarian actors have used patterns of leadership that reflect formal community structures, thus continuing to exclude women, instead of embracing the capacity and knowledge of WLOs. International donors have continued to fund these models of internationally led and male-dominated humanitarian action despite direct requests and public calls for support from WLOs.

## Conclusion

There is no time to waste – WLOs in Gaza are working in incredibly difficult conditions. If WLOs are not heard, then women’s and girls’ urgent needs will remain largely overlooked. The international community must support our efforts to provide crucial, lifesaving GBV services. At the same time, space must be made in the humanitarian system to allow for women (including those in WLOs) to shape humanitarian responses, putting their expertise and capacities at the forefront and thereby giving women, girls and other vulnerable people in Gaza the aid and services that they need.

**Nadia Al Bakri** is the Director of Women’s Affairs Technical Committee, originally from Rafah, formerly living and working in Gaza City. She is currently in Cairo, receiving medical treatment.

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## Women with disabilities leading humanitarian action

### Veronica Ngum Ndi

The assumption that women and girls with disabilities lack the capacity to participate in humanitarian response is an enduring prejudice in many conflicts and emergencies. The Community Association for Vulnerable Persons (CAVP) in Northwest Region Cameroon works to change perceptions about women with mobility impairments, hearing impairments, and mild intellectual disabilities, and to improve access for women and girls with disabilities to humanitarian interventions. The only women with disabilities-led organisation (WDLO) working in the humanitarian sector in Cameroon, CAVP works on economic empowerment, advocacy, medical assistance, gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and mitigation, education, and awareness-raising on sexual and reproductive health and rights. Women and girls with disabilities face a range of barriers in accessing humanitarian programmes and services designed by organisations utilising technical knowledge instead of lived experience. The specific needs of women and girls with disabilities and their families are seldom considered in the planning, implementing and

monitoring of humanitarian responses. Since 2015, CAVP has defied the stereotype of women with disabilities being reliant on others, addressing needs in its community by working to improve the lives of women and girls with disabilities and advocating for gender- and disability-responsive social protection in the Northwest Region.

## CAVP's work in Cameroon

Nearly a decade from its founding, CAVP has fought to be recognised as a humanitarian organisation, countering negative attitudes among both international and national actors who see women with disabilities as project participants, not partners or leaders. Working at the intersection of gender and disability, CAVP works to design and deliver humanitarian interventions focused on the specific needs of vulnerable women and girls, addressing the cracks in the humanitarian system that women and girls with disabilities too often fall through. In addition to advocating for gender- and disability-responsive project programming and service provision, CAVP works to reduce the risk of violence, abuse and exploitation against women and girls with disabilities through its programming in the health, protection, education and livelihoods sectors.



CAVP and other organisations mark International Women's Day 2024. Credit: Veronica Ngum Ndi

CAVP's organisational strategy is focused on addressing the priorities identified by vulnerable women and girls themselves, specifically by reducing stigma, decreasing dependency, and supporting decision-making. Too often, the rights of women and girls with disabilities are undermined by family members and carers taking decisions on their behalf, or by the experience of violence or marginalisation due to

stigma. CAVP provides training for women with disabilities in economic-empowerment skills so they can improve their financial independence, and provides start-up capital for women to open small businesses that in turn pay rent on their homes, meet medical needs, and pay school fees for their children. By addressing dependence on family members that isolates many vulnerable women, CAVP projects work to mitigate the risk of psychological abuse, neglect and denial of needs.

## **Enabling greater WDLO leadership and participation**

The challenges faced by women with disabilities are reflected in the challenges faced by WDLOs, for example, negative attitudes regarding women with disabilities – such as gaps in technological experience, skills and literacy – create scepticism about the ability of women with disabilities to lead and manage a humanitarian organisation. Many humanitarian actors view women with disabilities as ‘beneficiaries’ in need of humanitarian assistance, not as humanitarian decision-makers, due to the high rates of violence experienced by women and girls with disabilities and pre-crisis inequalities between men and women. The compounding effects of ableism, gender inequality and other forms of discrimination result in women’s marginalisation from leadership in humanitarian action. Women with disabilities are often excluded from leadership due to physical and communication barriers accessing meetings and being heard in decision-making forums, and bias against people with disabilities goes unaddressed in humanitarian structures.

Despite the success of CAVP interventions, significant challenges impede its work as CAVP senior leadership and staff fight for recognition and exposure in the crowded humanitarian sector. Competition among local organisations is fierce, with funding and resources controlled by large national organisations with well-established contacts and established reputations as humanitarian actors. In order to access humanitarian spaces, CAVP has to challenge discriminatory social norms relating to both gender and disability. Stigma and discrimination are significant barriers facing organisations of women with disabilities, including societal assumptions that women with disabilities are dependent on others, are unable to communicate, or have been excluded from education and work.

The role played by self-led humanitarian actors such as CAVP is increasingly recognised by humanitarian decision-makers in policy and guidance focused on meeting the needs of vulnerable communities, particularly in the case of reaching populations with multiple intersecting identities, such as women and girls with disabilities. For example, while men-led organisations of persons with disabilities or disability service providers may receive training on gender mainstreaming, GBV risk mitigation, etc., and recruit women as support staff to protect against sexual exploitation and abuse, decision-making and management remains with men leaders, limiting the impact that women with disabilities can achieve by utilising their lived experience, knowledge and understanding. While humanitarian organisations strive to address the gaps in their capacity to reach vulnerable women and girls, the direct participation of WDLOs in service provision provides invaluable insight into the personal experiences and impacts of these gaps. In the Northwest Region, CAVP’s advocacy has been essential in raising awareness of the unique risks faced by women and girls with disabilities, while also promoting equality, inclusion and

resilience. Fostering respectful and dignified representation of women with disabilities in humanitarian interventions – including health and protection information, education, and communication materials – has been highly impactful.

In order to effectively strengthen response capacity for disability inclusion, humanitarian organisations must actively engage with WDLOs and seek their guidance in adapting project activities to meet the specific needs of women and girls with disabilities. This requires moving beyond extractive consultations and actively engaging with WDLOs on their organisational strategies and institutional planning, beyond isolated project-funding opportunities. By making partnership with self-led groups of vulnerable persons a regular practice, humanitarian agencies can learn about and address disempowering practices in their activities and operations, for example, use of non-accessible venues for coordination meetings and workshops. WDLOs should be approached earlier in the project-development process, before discussions are constrained by predetermined budgets and intervention strategies. Pivots toward better practice like this can be arrived at via adaptive management and learning from WDLO partner feedback – in this case, feedback about the limited impact of consulting with organisations of women with disabilities on barriers to accessing humanitarian response after projects have been designed and funded.

## **Conclusion**

Women with disabilities offer unique knowledge and skills that are essential to removing barriers to humanitarian assistance. It is imperative to recognise women with disabilities as capable agents of change rather than passive recipients of aid. Humanitarian agencies must overcome their fear of engaging with WLOs at the design phase of projects and actively involve them in decision-making processes. This requires a shift in mindset and a willingness to share budget lines for direct and indirect costs with WLOs. Moreover, awareness-raising efforts among humanitarian staff must go beyond simply educating them on the rights of persons with disabilities. It is crucial for staff to see women with disabilities in leadership positions, demonstrating their capacity and dispelling assumptions about limited ability.

In conclusion, promoting the empowerment of women with disabilities in humanitarian settings requires a multifaceted approach that prioritises their voices, addresses systemic barriers, and fosters meaningful inclusion and representation. Only through collective action and genuine collaboration can we ensure that the rights and needs of all individuals are respected and upheld.

**Veronica Ngum Ndi** is CEO of Community Association for Vulnerable Persons (CAVP), Cameroon.



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## Women-led organisations' response to the Ukraine crisis

**Iryna Trokhym**



Iryna Trokhym speaking at a WLO strategy session in Lviv, Ukraine, in December 2023. Credit: Iryna Trokhym

Prior to the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Ukrainian women's organisations were focused on working towards gender equality in Ukraine, prevention of and support to survivors of domestic violence, and protection of women's human rights. Service provision to survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) by women-led organisations (WLOs) represented one of three pillars in the mission of women's organisations, along with protecting women's rights and ensuring equal rights and opportunities for women and men in all spheres of public life.

### **The post-invasion pivot**

This rapidly changed following 24 February 2022, as **7.1 million people** were displaced across Ukrainian borders to other countries, and **4.3 million children** were internally displaced inside Ukraine. In response to the growing humanitarian needs, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) across Ukraine mobilised their resources and expertise to provide critical support to people displaced by conflict. Ukrainian NGOs have been at the forefront of delivering emergency assistance, including food, water, shelter, healthcare and protection. Among them, WLOs swiftly pivoted in their work to provide essential services and humanitarian assistance to vulnerable women and girls amidst escalating tensions and displacement. This required agility and adaptability in the face of evolving challenges. WLOs expanded their programming to

meet the changing needs of affected communities, including providing assistance to internally displaced persons, supporting host communities, and addressing the specific needs of women, children and other vulnerable groups.

Amidst the complex operating environment, collaboration and coordination between WLOs, international partners and donors have been crucial for maximising the impact of frontline humanitarian response by WLOs. By mobilising resources, scaling effective response activities and funding response programming designed by WLOs, these actors have enabled women's organisations to reach more women and girls at risk of GBV and supported the increased reach of frontline WLO programming to women and girls in eastern Ukraine as the conflict has continued. However, numerous challenges persist, including access constraints, security risks and funding shortfalls. Moreover, the protracted nature of the conflict underscores the importance of sustained support for WLO humanitarian programming in Ukraine.

## **The urgent needs of women and girls and the move to meet them**

Women in conflict-affected areas of Ukraine face an increased risk of GBV, further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, when women and girls experienced increased violence from intimate partners and other forms of domestic violence within households during quarantine. In February 2022, already vulnerable women and girls had often exhausted coping strategies and limited access to services. Specialised services to GBV survivors and women and girls at risk of GBV were identified as a priority by humanitarian donors and operational agencies alike, seeking to target **149,445 women and girls during the first 12 months of the crisis**. This target increased further as the needs of vulnerable women and girls in affected communities became apparent in assessments and monitoring; in February 2023, the **Humanitarian Response Plan** announced that 1.2 million women and girls would be targeted for GBV response.

Civil society quickly mobilised as first responders to affected people displaced by the Russian invasion in 2022, and many WLOs became the most accessible provider of services to vulnerable women and girls. While responding to the urgency of these needs was in line with the focus of women's organisations of providing services to GBV survivors and protecting women's rights, it constituted a departure from their core work and planned use of resources. In order to urgently support access to critical services and humanitarian aid for **7.8 million women and 2 million girls in need of assistance**, WLOs swiftly pivoted to reprogramme funding and rapidly mobilise donor support for humanitarian response activities targeting women and girls. In addition to reprogramming funding from human rights and development donors supporting gender equality and women's civil society in Ukraine prior to February 2022, WLOs now also came into contact with humanitarian donors and agencies.

Significant interest from protection-mandated agencies and donors to scale up GBV services to the vulnerable women and girls that constituted the target population of women's organisations created a positive environment for partnership between international humanitarian actors and WLOs. Rapidly mobilised funding from international agencies allowed WLO the Centre for Women's Perspectives (CWP) to scale up emergency shelter for vulnerable women and girls beyond its initial projections, due to the

availability of funding and the willingness of humanitarian agencies to adapt their criteria for partner funding to the context. During the first six months of the conflict, humanitarian funding was focused in the Lviv hub in western Ukraine, where the CWP operates.

The CWP was established in 1998 to uphold women's rights by combating violence against women, promoting women's participation in decision-making processes in Ukraine, and implementing and advancing the position of women in society. Funding discussions with several donors were initiated by the CWP to address the need for emergency shelter for vulnerable women and girls in February 2022, and following unanimously positive responses from the five donors approached, the CWP scaled up its initial plan and opened multiple shelters for vulnerable women and girls in March–August 2022.

## **New challenges for Ukrainian women-led organisations**

The influx of humanitarian funding, donor interest in GBV response, and willingness of many international agencies to lift restrictions and criteria that often disqualify women's organisations from accessing funding provided a new challenge to WLOs in terms of organisational development and strategic growth. While low-level and poor quality funding for women's organisations in Ukraine had previously been the main threat to WLO capacity, the flood of funding and demand for WLO implementing partners was its own challenge that threatened to undermine the decades of strategic planning and mission focus of Ukrainian women's groups. In the face of overwhelming need and abounding inquiries from international actors seeking to quickly begin programming across various humanitarian sectors, space for dialogue about an organisation's mission was limited. Pressure from international actors to sign up local organisations as implementing partners often necessitated firm pushback by WLOs. In some cases, international humanitarian agencies operating as donors sought partnerships with women's organisations for general distributions regardless of specific focus on vulnerable women and girls. This created a strategic challenge for WLOs in adhering to their organisational mission while responding to new and emerging needs created by the Russian invasion.

The destabilisation of the funding and operational environment for women's organisations and local GBV actors required concerted efforts across networks of women's organisations to coordinate and share capacity among WLOs. Pressure on local organisations to respond positively to the sudden abundance of partnership opportunities presented a challenge to the leadership of many organisations starved of funds and stretched to capacity following the Covid-19 pandemic. Women's organisations such as the CWP had been faced with a twofold increase in demand for domestic violence services between 2019 and 2020, leading to an increase in workload both in operations and policy advocacy, in order to address the increasingly visible gaps in services for women and girls facing violence. In 2022, this demand increased exponentially as operations increased tenfold.

WLOs worked hard to create a dialogue about the importance of their strategic focus on vulnerable women and girls, and addressed the risks of unsustainable expansion through reactive and short-term operations in response to demand from international agencies. In rural areas outside of the Lviv hub especially, local WLOs were operating in challenging circumstances with already strained capacity,

financial means and operational resources. As the footprint of humanitarian response moved further east in 2023, WLOs such as the CWP have pivoted from providing direct support in western Ukraine to increasingly providing capacity-strengthening and strategic support to WLOs operating closer to the frontline, as they negotiate funding and partnerships with international actors in order to scale their programming to the needs of vulnerable women and girls.

## Conclusion

As established women's organisations in western Ukraine shift to sharing capacity with WLOs working further east, the importance of work protecting women's human rights and gender equality become increasingly relevant to humanitarian planning and response. It is essential that the rights of women and girls remain at the centre of the humanitarian response, and WLOs are well placed to influence and inform humanitarian decision-making. WLOs remain committed to providing lifesaving assistance and support to women and girls affected by the conflict, and they are also looking to the future. There are opportunities for innovation, collaboration and resilience-building to mitigate the impact of the crisis and support long-term recovery efforts through the multifaceted work of WLOs on gender equality, prevention of violence, and women's participation in decision-making processes. In order to lead this work, WLOs invite the sustained and flexible support of international partners to the implementation of their mission now and moving forward.

**Iryna Trokhym** is the Vice Head at the Centre for Women's Perspectives (Центр Жіночі перспективи) and Coordinator at the Call to Action Field Implementation (CAFI) network for capacity-strengthening of WLOs in Ukraine.

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## The unmet need for women-led organisation access to direct humanitarian funding

### Jeanne Frangieh

Women-led organisations (WLOs) working in the humanitarian sector face difficulties accessing humanitarian funding in a system created by and for international actors. With record levels of support from donors in response to the Ukraine and Afghanistan crises in recent years, multi-year humanitarian funding has **increased**, but distribution of this funding has heavily favoured multilateral organisations. WLOs continue to receive minimal funding directly from donors. This is despite growing recognition of the value and role of WLOs, which are agile and nimble with direct access to women and girls through their presence and operations in conflict- and disaster-affected localities.

Additionally, propositions to address the humanitarian funding gap are developed through dialogues at the headquarter level that WLOs do not regularly have access to participate in, resulting in solutions that

don't address the specific barriers that WLOs face and fail to grapple with the totality of the problem and its impact, often further entrenching disparities. With the overwhelming balance of funding towards international agencies, humanitarian funding and decision-making spaces are often inaccessible to WLOs. While WLOs may be invited to participate in pre-orchestrated discussions about reform of the humanitarian system, opportunities to engage with institutional donors directly about their funding criteria, humanitarian priorities, and opportunities for new partners to apply for funding are very limited.

## **Barriers to greater funding**

In the power dynamics of the current humanitarian funding landscape, WLOs face challenges articulating and justifying their funding needs, and in demonstrating their organisational capacity to effectively manage resources. Donors often perceive WLOs as higher risk due to factors such as their limited core funding, lack of institutional infrastructure, or perceived instability due to lack of overhead funding support. Furthermore, tentativeness and scepticism from institutional donors about the mechanics of transitioning away from working through expensive intermediaries to working with WLOs directly create an environment in which the burden falls on WLOs to accept any and all limitations on offers of donor funding, including limited or non-existent overhead cost support. This continues the vicious cycle of under-funding that adds increased financial pressure on and limits the resilience of WLOs, while impeding the inter-agency agenda to increase humanitarian funding directly to WLOs in order to better target and reach vulnerable women and girls in humanitarian settings.

For example, the dominant current practice of funding WLOs through large allocations to United Nations (UN) agencies – or to a lesser extent, multi-year block grants to international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) – for disbursement requires significant amounts of humanitarian funding for intermediary overhead costs before any funding reaches WLOs. At the same time, donor preference for low overhead ratios disadvantages WLOs, as smaller grassroots organisations have a higher overhead percentage than an international agency, despite the comparatively low actual costs of WLOs' overheads compared to the overhead costs of UN agencies and INGOs.

## **The urgent need for direct funding**

Without overhead funding or the large reserves that INGOs, UN agencies and established national NGOs have, WLOs need direct access to institutional donors or grant facilities in order to implement self-designed responses for their target population. They need access to funding to define their own programmes and build experience and confidence in project design, proposal development and implementation. WLOs are so often entirely reliant on project funding in order to resource humanitarian programming and organisational overheads. They require access to budgetary allocations in order to undertake rapid assessments and provide immediate lifesaving humanitarian assistance to vulnerable women and girls in their area of operation, to deploy staff, contribute to or co-lead coordination, and to design and develop longer-term projects with suitable partners. However, increasing reliance by institutional donors on UN agencies to deliver humanitarian programming entrenches inequality in access to resources and direct relations with donors. This is despite the policy commitments of

international agencies and organisations, and indeed institutional donors themselves, to increase direct funding to local and national humanitarian organisations. Unfortunately, it seems that increased and more explicit policies articulating localisation objectives and support for local leadership do not reliably translate into improved funding opportunities for WLOs.

The current trend, which has enabled large donors to provide unprecedented levels of support for acute crises such as Ukraine, involves donors launching fewer calls for proposals and concentrating greater amounts of funding in each call. While this has allowed large amounts of humanitarian funding to be provided by donors to urgent humanitarian appeals, it moves donors further away from recent commitments to locally led response designed and implemented by organisations working directly with affected communities. This disadvantages women-led and other local organisations competing for funds to design appropriate and effective humanitarian responses, as they are likely to be smaller, less networked with institutional donors, and with comparatively limited administrative structures. For example, the complex bid requirements set by donors for large funding opportunities limit access by WLOs who cannot reach the required criteria for operating budgets. This trend perpetuates a system of selective access to direct funding, which in turn entrenches the hierarchy of ‘fundable’ organisations that relegates WLOs to the role of implementing partner to an international grantee, with limited input in or impact on project design and strategy. The repercussions of these trends are further entangled with the complex power dynamics that WLOs navigate in the humanitarian sector, such as patriarchal cultural conventions and restricted access to professional and industry networks for WLOs.



Participants at a workshop for WLOs on GBV run by Himaya Daeem Aataa in January 2024. In one activity, participants released balloons representing negativity. Credit: Jeanne Frangieh

## Wider trends in localisation

This pattern is a repetition of the power structures operating throughout the humanitarian system between local and international actors, e.g. traditional approaches to capacity-strengthening by INGOs and UN agencies keeping local partners dependent on international intermediaries in order to access institutional funding, instead of targeting the staff of intermediary and donor organisations to increase their knowledge and understanding of agency commitments to localisation and flexible financing. While there are donors that have adopted policies in line with such commitments, donor staff at field level are more often following standard practice than recent policy, and the mindset of staff at donor agencies is often an obstacle to working with WLOs. In practice this means that even if local organisations are able to compete for project funding, they don't have the same access to negotiate grant conditions with donor partners as international counterparts do. This creates an expectation of failure among WLOs, which has the negative effect of discouraging many from attempting to compete.

In Lebanon, the funding environment is complex and competitive, spanning multidimensional crises, including the Syria response and escalation of hostilities in South Lebanon, and is dominated by UN agencies and INGOs. Despite significant presence of donor organisations in Beirut, direct access to donors in order to discuss organisational strategy and capacity and develop professional contacts is highly limited for WLOs. Success in securing funding opportunities and calls for proposals launched in-country are concentrated among international actors already known to donor organisations, creating a vicious cycle for WLOs unable to access donors or compete on an even playing field. Staff at donor and intermediary organisations may have more to lose from changing their current practice and diversifying away from known organisations, or may not prioritise relationship-building with specialised local actors working with affected communities on agendas such as preventing sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA), gender mainstreaming and gender-based violence (GBV), due to high workload and competing priorities. Concerns regarding language skills or fear of raising expectations of direct funding among local organisations may also be factors, which need to be addressed through donor policy and guidance regarding good practice for relationship-building with WLOs through networks and regional initiatives.

It is notable that examples where WLOs have been able to engage directly with donors have come at major international meetings rather than in the settings where they work, although this is also beset with limitations and exclusions. In my own experience, opportunities to engage directly with donor colleagues focused on GBV through international conferences and initiatives, such as the Prevention of Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (PSVI) and the Call to Action on Protection from GBV in Emergencies, have enabled WLOs to raise their profile and initiate contact with donor and intermediary agencies. This creates further inequality, however, between those organisations who are able to travel to international meetings and secure funding for their participation, often based on visa status and language skills, and others doing highly impactful work at country level who are not able to leverage contact with technical specialists in the donor community in order to make contact with donor colleagues locally. The unintentional result of the restricted contact between country-based donors and local organisations is

a gatekeeping system, in which WLOs are reliant on in-country INGOs or UN agencies to access donor funding, or must utilise a system of introduction by headquarter-based contacts in order to successfully navigate the contact process with a donor colleague based in the same city as their own organisation.

In order to circumvent the status quo of limited access to humanitarian funding for local organisations, WLOs such as Himaya Daeem Aataa in Lebanon have started initiating discussions with INGOs about publicly posted funding opportunities, in an effort to reverse the power dynamics that relegate local organisations to an implementing-partner role. By taking the initiative to propose a consortium of local actors in partnership with an INGO, WLOs are working to align funding opportunities with local needs and priorities, identifying a way forward for local humanitarian action designed and implemented by WLOs, while donors work to reform their policies and procedures for humanitarian funding.

## **Conclusion**

It is my hope that these ongoing efforts by donors to meet their Grand Bargain commitments to funding locally led humanitarian action will blossom and bear fruit, and that the UN agencies and INGOs currently dominating the humanitarian funding landscape will embrace the opportunity to pivot from the status quo to a more effective and efficient humanitarian response sector led by local knowledge and action. In order to reach this future, however, humanitarian leaders need to hold each other accountable for progress towards increasing the percentage of humanitarian funding flowing directly from donors to local organisations, and ask why WLOs are not recipients of the funds and resources channelled to INGOs and UN agencies. Donors need to promote equitable funding practices by recognising the value of investing in organisational capacity-building and providing flexible funding mechanisms that cover both direct and indirect costs. They must also incentivise collective effort on capacity-sharing and wider shifts in power and resources among humanitarian actors if they are to attain the change that they want from humanitarian actors that appeal to them for funds.

As WLOs, we will continue to play our part by building strong networks and engaging with donors wherever possible to propose direct funding to WLOs, effectively communicating our impact and funding needs, and encouraging donors and intermediary agencies to look at how access to resources and direct relations with donors are controlled and what effect this has on the evolution of humanitarian leadership and response. WLOs have a vital role to play in the humanitarian system and we continue to fight and search for opportunities to achieve this.

**Jeanne Frangieh** is the founder and Director of Himaya Daeem Aataa.



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## Transitioning from face-to-face to remote capacity-sharing among women-led organisations in Afghanistan

**Zarqa Yaftali**



Two women pass the Blue Mosque, Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan. Credit: Jono Photography/Shutterstock

In Afghanistan, the rollback of women's and girls' rights and freedoms has drastically shrunk the operational space for women-led organisations (WLOs), at precisely the moment that the contribution of WLOs is most vital for humanitarian planning and decision-making. Since the Taliban takeover in 2021, the adaptability and resilience of organisations working on the ground in Afghanistan has been tested immensely. Many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) ceased operations or evacuated staff from Afghanistan following August 2021 due to concerns for the safety and security of their staff, as well as uncertainty surrounding the operating environment under Taliban rule. For those that remained, withdrawal of international staff from provincial level to Kabul necessitated shifts to static service delivery for international agencies, leaving local actors as the last link for communities in need of protection and basic services.

Restrictions on women's work and public participation created significant risks for women humanitarian workers, with women NGO staff working on GBV, protection and women's empowerment reporting a higher level of operating risk compared to other humanitarian staff. Varying restrictions imposed by de facto authorities at provincial level limited the presence and mobility of women staff, based on determination of 'suitable activities' by local authorities. This also impacted the ability of women humanitarians to actively participate in the full spectrum of the humanitarian programme cycle.

The combination of restrictions (women's right to work, sex segregation in the workplace, mahram requirements, and safety and security concerns regarding travelling to and from work) has resulted in the majority of women humanitarian staff working from home, for those who have not fled the country.

This rollback has also reduced the operational space for WLOs in Afghanistan. Women's civil society continues to exist in Afghanistan; however, WLOs' operations have been significantly curtailed and their access to funding through institutional partnerships greatly reduced as many international actors perceive partnering with WLOs as a risk in the uncertain political environment. Donors discontinued projects supporting WLOs, which has impacted the support and resources available to these organisations and to women human rights defenders. Areas of work that directly challenge the Taliban's position on women's rights face the most obstacles, with Taliban directives considerably diminishing the operational space for WLOs to operate. WLOs have reported contract termination on the basis of Taliban refusal to allow projects related to the implementation of existing law (e.g. Law on Elimination of Violence Against Women, 2009) or revisions (e.g. the Civil Code, 1976).

## **A challenging operating environment**

The presence of strong and active WLOs in humanitarian response in Afghanistan is crucial to respond to the needs of women and girls, and to inform decision-makers of the evolving situation vis-à-vis the regulatory environment. This has necessitated a rapid digital transformation, complete with resource and organisational challenges akin to those experienced by international organisations at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. Unlike international organisations, local WLOs in Afghanistan did not receive the organisational investments to shift to remote work during the pandemic, and the experiences of WLOs transitioning from face-to-face to remote activities during the Taliban-imposed restrictions in Afghanistan have been very different to those of international organisations with women staff working remotely. In addition, the capacity and resources within the WLO sector have been significantly depleted due to the departure of many women leaders from Afghanistan, lack of financial liquidity, and ongoing security concerns. As the humanitarian community mobilises a huge response with exponential increase in humanitarian financing coming into the country, the presence of women in the humanitarian sector has never been lower, nor funding less accessible. Now, with the risks facing women and girls and the constraints on women civil society organisations accessing funding and support, the recognition of and engagement with WLOs are more important than they have ever been.

Most local WLOs operating in Afghanistan have limited opportunity to compete in calls for programme proposals due to the size, institutional set-up and limited resourcing of WLOs, in addition to the lack of registration available to WLOs. Even registered WLOs are unable to compete with organisations led by men due to selection criteria and requirements that favour larger NGOs or those that can carry out a pre-assessment, which requires pre-existing funding that many WLOs do not have. The duration of grants that WLOs receive is often only 3–6 months, fostering frequent staff turnover and discontinuities in programming. Despite interest among donors to support frontline work with women and girls in Afghanistan, local WLOs are not large or institutionalised enough to meet donor minimum standards for reporting and due diligence. But without funding, there is no way for them to strengthen their

institutional capacity, and thus the support and decision-making power needed remain out of reach, despite public declarations from donors and philanthropic organisations about supporting women-led frontline response.

In addition, the gains that we have seen in Afghan women's representation in peace processes and development discussions have not been equalled in the humanitarian sector due to lack of investment, practical work and tangible commitments in women's voice and participation by humanitarian stakeholders. As a result, women's representation in humanitarian planning and decision-making in Afghanistan is much lower than corresponding levels in peace processes.

## **Shifting from face-to-face to remote working**

Moving programme implementation online involved meticulous planning and targeted interventions to ensure continuity and relevance. Specific modifications, such as sourcing and distributing laptops to local WLOs through a United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funding programme, Women's Voice and Leadership in Humanitarian Settings, were instrumental in bridging the digital divide and facilitating a smoother transition to new platforms, familiarising WLOs with this technology, and enabling them to harness it to effectively achieve the programme's objectives. The use of Zoom for meetings between WLOs in 2021 became a pivotal adaptation, ensuring that dialogues and capacity-sharing efforts among Afghan WLOs continued unhindered. This platform was chosen for its accessibility and security, providing a conducive environment for communication. Moreover, regular phone calls replaced individual visits, allowing for personalised interactions and ensuring that individual needs and concerns were addressed. The impact of these adaptations extends beyond enhanced digital literacy. By institutionalising online methods into their regular operations, WLOs can leverage diverse stakeholder relationships, fostering robust global connections and achieving broader humanitarian goals. This impact will continue beyond the current environment, and fits in a larger framework of resilience, ensuring that the voices of those who need to be heard will be elevated to global decision-making spaces.

The abrupt shift to online platforms posed several challenges, including technical issues that inhibited meaningful digital interactions (issues such as internet connectivity difficulties, use of different online applications, and power outages). The initial lack of digital literacy and connectivity issues not only required distribution of hardware, but crucially also digital literacy training in local languages by WLO staff already familiar with the technology, including by women leaders now working outside of Afghanistan. Digital literacy training was repeatedly provided by and for local WLOs operating at community level by the Women and Children Legal Research Foundation, with much effort and at flexible times, when internet connections were strongest, to ensure that local WLOs in different areas of Afghanistan were able to remain connected to the wider community.

Transitioning from traditional face-to-face engagement to remote capacity-sharing in a complex environment like Afghanistan has been both enlightening and challenging. The impact of the transition to online platforms has been profound. It has not only enhanced WLOs' digital literacy and networking capabilities, but also ensured that coordination of humanitarian activities among WLOs has been

maintained. As a result, WLO voices are able to reach humanitarian decision-makers through established channels, though with significant room for improvement. Afghan WLOs' ability to pivot to a new working model has demonstrated their resilience, their tenacity to face and overcome myriad challenges facing the local humanitarian community, and the relevance of WLOs as a data source for the situation of women and girls in affected communities.

## **Conclusion**

While the humanitarian efforts of WLOs in Afghanistan and other challenging contexts may be riddled with unpredictability, the success of capacity-sharing among WLOs is distinguished by the trifecta of adaptability, resilience and continuous feedback. This ensures that even in the face of adversity, the voices that need to be heard don't fade into silence but resonate loud and clear. More can be achieved by addressing online infrastructure; funding technological support and digital literacy training; switching to flexible funding mechanisms; and replicating the model in contexts facing similar challenges. By supporting the enhancement of internet connectivity and digital infrastructure in specific areas where WLOs operate, improved online infrastructure can facilitate communication, collaboration and access to resources for WLOs and the communities they serve. Provision of technological support and digital literacy training for WLOs can significantly enhance WLO digital skills and capabilities and leverage technology for advocacy. Flexible funding mechanisms that consider the unique challenges faced by WLOs in contexts such as Afghanistan with extreme restrictions on WLOs are critical for adaptable and responsive humanitarian programming. Donors must listen to the specific needs and constraints experienced by WLOs operating in areas with restrictions, such as limited access to resources or security concerns. Flexible funding can enable WLOs to address emerging challenges and opportunities, maintain operational continuity, and effectively provide lifesaving services to women and girls. Finally, replicating this model in contexts facing similar challenges can provide some good practice out of the overwhelmingly difficult experience of WLOs continuing to operate in Afghanistan. By sharing successful strategies and lessons learned, this approach can be adapted and replicated to support the empowerment and resilience of women in diverse contexts facing extreme restrictions on their humanitarian work.

**Zarqa Yaftali** is Director of the Women and Children Legal Research Foundation.

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## Women-led organisation engagement and influence in the Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence

**Claudine Tsongo**

Dynamique des Femmes Juristes (DFJ), a women-led organisation (WLO) founded by a collective of women lawyers in 2008 to provide legal support to women in North Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), has worked in humanitarian response for more than two decades. As a local WLO participating in the gender-based violence (GBV) sector and humanitarian coordination at provincial level, DFJ works to influence decision-making with regards to GBV and humanitarian preparedness and planning on a local level. DFJ advocacy on the scale of needs for women and girls at risk of and experiencing GBV in multi-dimensional conflict and humanitarian crises in DRC, and the urgency of funding for frontline humanitarian response by WLOs, focused on local decision-makers that were accessible to WLOs.

Within North Kivu province, DFJ has prosecuted hundreds of cases to ensure that rural women have access to justice for GBV. It has trained paralegals in rural areas and advocates for legal protections for women and girls. DFJ built its reputation locally through its GBV response, highlighting the expertise and capacity of local GBV actors, and exemplifying the value of local leadership in humanitarian decision-making. Over time, DFJ expanded its advocacy work from local and national to global level to reach more senior decision-makers, who have greater resources to address gaps in GBV prevention and care, promote GBV resource mobilisation, and integrate GBV prevention, response and risk mitigation in humanitarian planning at both national and global levels. This was achieved by devoting significant resources to engagement in global-level decision-making spaces, such as the United Kingdom-led Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (PSVI), the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) High-Level Roundtable on GBV Financing, and most significantly, the Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies (Call to Action).

### **Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies**

Since 2018, DFJ has engaged in the Call to Action, a multi-stakeholder initiative founded in 2013 by donor governments, United Nations (UN) agencies and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), that works to mobilise resources, increase attention and strengthen programming to better prevent and respond to violence against women and girls in emergencies.

DFJ has worked resolutely to leverage the visibility and participation in decision-making spaces that the Call to Action affords. A rare opportunity for DFJ to contribute to policy discourse and global decision-making, the Call to Action also provides an opening for DFJ to increase attention to challenges meeting the humanitarian needs of women and girls in DRC. In 2020, DFJ became the first women-led

organisation admitted as a signatory to the global Call to Action partnership, and continues to champion the Call to Action, acting as a coach and mentor to WLOs active in GBV prevention and response, within the central and west Africa region.



Claudine Tsongo speaking at the official launch of the 'Women's voice and leadership in humanitarian settings' project, in Kinshasa, DRC, in February 2023. Credit: Claudine Tsongo

## Call to Action country pilot in DRC

In 2017, a Call to Action country pilot was planned in Northeast Nigeria, followed by plans in 2018 for a second country pilot in DRC, to increase resources, coordination and funding for GBV prevention and response in these contexts and explore the value of the Call to Action partnership at country level. This presented an opportunity to GBV actors in DRC to engage with the Call to Action and to demonstrate the value of their practical insights and expertise to international partners. DFJ saw the Call to Action pilot as an opportunity to address gaps in GBV prevention and care, improve coordination between provinces, promote GBV resource mobilisation from Call to Action donor signatories present in DRC, and integrate GBV prevention, response and risk mitigation in humanitarian planning at provincial and national levels. A national roadmap for 2018–2020 was launched by the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Ministry of Gender, Children and Family in March 2019 in Kinshasa.

DFJ coordinated among WLOs from different provinces to showcase the range of expertise and present on different conditions across contexts in DRC at the national launch workshop, and to lobby UNFPA to broaden the planned pilot and engage in multiple provinces.

Despite limited resources to support outreach to GBV actors at provincial level in the national launch workshop, DFJ engagement in the annual meeting in Brussels provided valuable experience with the Call to Action initiative at the global level which was useful to the coordinators of the DRC country pilot. DFJ leveraged this connection to secure invitations for two additional WLOs, Réseaux Femmes et Développement (REFED) and Forum des Mamans de l'Ituri (FOMI), to attend the national launch workshop and become signatories to the DRC roadmap. DFJ convened a panel discussion among WLOs at the national workshop to surface the challenges of and opportunities for Call to Action field implementation in the conflict-affected provinces of Kasai Orientale, Ituri and North Kivu. This session changed the conversation at the workshop about how the pilot could improve GBV prevention and response in DRC, the modalities for coordination among partners, and the profile of actors needed to meet the challenge of implementing activities, advocacy and coordination to reach the goals of the pilot. This engagement continued beyond the national workshop, with DFJ playing a central role at the North Kivu provincial workshop, and with the ongoing reporting of activities into the roadmap. In 2020, DFJ conducted a provincial evaluation of engagement in the Call to Action.

## **Local to global: sharing learning from DRC**

Throughout the experience of engaging in the DRC pilot, DFJ remained enthusiastic to share perspectives and experience with Call to Action partners at the global level, but was not able to participate in the NGO working group of the Call to Action as it was not yet a signatory. However, DFJ was invited to participate in the 2019 annual partners meeting in Geneva by Global Affairs Canada (the meeting coordinator). Despite significant obstacles to attending the meeting, including strict visa requirements and lack of influence over the visa application process by the meeting organiser, DFJ resolved to attend to demonstrate the experience, knowledge and insights that could be shared by WLOs within the Call to Action partnership and strengthen further implementation of the global roadmap at field level. Due to budget limitations, French interpretation was not available throughout all sessions of the meeting, which posed a challenge to active participation from DFJ, but the potential of the Call to Action as an opportunity for WLOs to mobilise needed attention to the challenges faced by GBV actors at country level remained clear.

Since the early experiences of participation as an observing non-signatory in 2018 and 2019, DFJ has continued to strengthen its engagement in the Call to Action, becoming the first WLO signatory to the Call to Action in 2020, and advocating for the enlargement of Call to Action membership to include GBV actors from the Global South. DFJ's intention to mobilise additional resources and expertise to address the unmet needs of women and girls in DRC by coordinating with partners from the global Call to Action evolved into a multi-year investment in a global process, originated by international partners operating in English, working at HQ level. The country pilot in DRC provided a unique opportunity for DFJ to act as a conduit between field-based actors engaging with the Call to Action locally and global actors engaging

with the Call to Action in a policymaking capacity. Building relationships of trust with international GBV actors in the humanitarian system steadily increased DFJ's influence as a member of the NGO working group and a valued signatory of the Call to Action, which in turn created space for more WLOs to engage at a global level. By contributing evidence of the collective and organisational capacity of local WLOs to design, lead and deliver humanitarian responses to women and girls at risk of GBV, DFJ and 15 other WLO signatories have raised the profile of the work undertaken by WLOs to influence the local and national humanitarian agenda as regards prioritising GBV prevention, response and risk mitigation through coordination and advocacy.

## **Women-led organisation engagement and influence**

Within the structures of the Call to Action, DFJ has advocated for interpretation in meetings of the NGO working group and in all sessions of the annual partners meeting, worked with lead governments to regularise the visa application process for meeting attendees, and pushed for transparency throughout planning of the annual meeting so WLOs can contribute to development of the agenda and take on leadership and coordination roles. As the first WLO to join the Call to Action, DFJ champions a shared vision of working together as diverse GBV actors to break through obstacles facing the GBV community, and encourages signatories to pool resources and expertise in the DRC context and beyond. This has included mobilising resources for field implementation of the Call to Action in the West and Central Africa region as a co-creator of the 'Call to Action Field Implementation' project with the Arab Women Organization of Jordan (AWO) and CARE USA, and acting as a coach and mentor to WLOs active in GBV prevention and response, within the West and Central Africa region.

The increased interest in the Call to Action engendered in the region through this work has also yielded dividends in increased focus on the region within the Call to Action at global level. WLO signatories to the Call to Action from the West and Central Africa region have greatly increased since Germany took the lead of the Call to Action in 2023 and provided opportunities in French language for prospective signatories to apply to join the Call to Action.

However, obstacles to WLO engagement remain significant for the dozens of organisations that have demonstrated interest in joining the Call to Action as a global signatory. Long delays in processing signatory applications during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic and the transition from Denmark to Germany as lead government limited engagement in the NGO working group. Language barriers remain at the working group and steering committee levels, and are a sizable obstacle to equal and meaningful participation by WLOs. Despite challenges managing the time commitment, bureaucratic requirements and language barriers, WLOs see participation in the Call to Action as a worthy endeavour. They feel that they are engaging with the appropriate actors, at the appropriate level, to take part in global decision-making for the GBV community, rather than being relegated to local-level implementation only.



## Conclusion

DFJ has maintained its enthusiasm to share experience of participating in the Call to Action, navigating the signatory process, and engaging in the NGO working group, with WLOs from diverse emergency settings who struggle to raise the profile of unmet needs and challenges faced by women and girls in their contexts. DFJ and other WLO signatories have worked to promote inclusion of local GBV actors in the Call to Action annual meeting, which included 10 WLOs in 2023, by energetically engaging in planning to bring together global partners requiring visas, interpretation and dialogues across both practical GBV actors and technical/institutional experts. Over the course of its six-year engagement in the Call to Action, DFJ has seen an appreciable difference in what the Call to Action has evolved and grown to become, particularly its relevance to challenges in better resourcing and wider implementation of GBV prevention and response. Additionally, DFJ champions initiatives led by local partners, such as regional Call to Action roadmaps, which facilitate South–South exchange among GBV actors and collaboration with international agencies on humanitarian advocacy for women and girls in emergencies. DFJ and sister WLOs are leveraging these global platforms not only to mobilise resources for unmet needs in local contexts, but also to call for more equal partnership approaches, focused mentorship, and longer-term support of and capacity-exchange with WLOs.

**Claudine Tsongo** is Coordinator and Co-Founder of Dynamique des Femmes Juristes.

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## Women-led organisations and feminist foreign policy in Colombia

### **Erika Veloza Martinez**

Women's movements and women-led organisations (WLOs) in Colombia have been internationally recognised for their significant contributions to peacebuilding, particularly the tireless work on the inclusion of women's needs and gender perspectives in the 2016 peace agreement signed by the Colombian government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FARC). WLOs receive less recognition, however, for their work as humanitarian actors, despite their significant contributions, especially in the health and protection sectors, to highlighting and responding to the humanitarian needs of affected populations and defending women's rights within the context of displacement, migration and crisis. The contributions of WLOs in the development of Colombia's feminist foreign policy (FFP) have led to reforms in the legal framework, impacting the creation of laws, rulings and governmental responses to humanitarian needs in Colombia. By bridging the nexus of humanitarian, peace and development work, WLOs have made significant contributions both to the advancement of a participatory and inclusive National Action Plan for Resolution 1325, and have co-created participatory mechanisms for implementation and monitoring of the Colombian FFP with government.

The Colombia context provides a template of a diverse, intersectional and inclusive co-creation processes for foreign policy development through participatory dialogue between government and civil society, successfully reconciling different perspectives between the national government and WLOs. The work of Colombian WLOs within international spaces of multilateral advocacy has been essential to this agenda, and led to the adoption of a mechanism for WLOs to participate in Colombian government delegations at international forums in March 2024. The challenges and opportunities in the Colombia context require the application of a triple nexus (i.e., humanitarian, peace and development) vision to combine the agendas of peace and security; response to migration, displacement and disaster; and development. Colombia has one of the largest internal displacement contexts in the world, with **6.8 million** internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees, and a refugee influx from the Venezuela crisis of almost 3 million people, as part of much larger mixed migratory flows. Together, the triple nexus context presents the opportunity for coordinated and comprehensive actions in the form of FFP.

## **Feminist foreign policy in Colombia**

Colombia's feminist foreign policy is composed of five pillars: Social Justice; Environmental Justice; Total Peace; Education, Science and Culture; and Social Transformation and Institutional Strengthening. Connecting these pillars through the core principle of intersectionality, the policy specifies that gender cannot be understood in isolation from or privileged over other social categories. It aims to include population diversity as well as intersections between gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, and other identities. The pillars cover the following:

- The 'Social Justice' pillar aims to foster global human security and social justice, transforming political and social structures, promoting equitable representation in international decisions, and gender equality.
- The 'Environmental Justice' pillar includes advocating for equitable ecological protection, ensuring the participation of women and vulnerable communities, and implementing climate and conservation strategies that respect the specific needs of these communities.
- The 'Total Peace' pillar incorporates an intersectional approach in promoting peace and security, recognising unique experiences related to gender, ethnicity and other identities, addressing GBV, and developing international policies sensitive to these intersections.
- The 'Education, Science and Culture' pillar aims to promote equal access to education and participation in science and culture. It includes intersectional perspectives in the development of artificial intelligence and fosters inclusion in scientific and cultural activities.
- Finally, the 'Social Transformation and Institutional Strengthening' pillar focuses on transformative change in social norms and attitudes that perpetuate gender inequality and discrimination, and on enhancing the capacity of institutions to effectively address gender issues and mainstream gender perspectives into policies and programmes.

The FFP was presented at the 68th annual Commission on the Status of Women (CSW 68) in March 2024 as an evolving document that seeks to reduce and eliminate structural gender gaps and inequalities

by mainstreaming the transformative gender perspective, protecting the human rights of women and girls, as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, intersex (LGBTQI+) individuals, and recognising intersectionality in different areas of foreign policy.

## Women-led organisations as feminist foreign policy advocates

WLO alliances have employed various strategies in promoting feminist policy agendas in Colombia, spanning collective advocacy, participation in government bodies to provide technical support and lobby for policy changes, strategic litigation, and international diplomacy. WLOs have the potential to positively impact the development of public policies, due to the expertise, institutional memory and multifaceted profiles of WLOs working as humanitarian actors, peacemakers, and campaigners for social transformation. The increasing representation of feminists with extensive experience in governance and public policies in the Vice-Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the work of WLOs with these government stakeholders to include a FFP in the current government's National Development Plan, is a case in point. Cooperation between WLOs through an alliance, 'Encuentro Internacional de Diplomacia Feminista por La Paz' (Feminist Diplomacy for Peace), provided an agile framework for WLOs to collectively engage with the Vice-Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Vice-Ministry led the adoption of a FFP by the government of Colombia in 2022, as a strategy to boost women's rights on the national and international agenda, and to address gaps in implementation at the state level of government commitments to the rights of women and girls in all their diversity throughout the country.



Launch of GENFAMI's Women Leading Change project in Naríno, Colombia in 2023. Credit: Erika Veloza Martinez

Restructuring within government since 2022 has resulted in the delegation of responsibility for FFP to a new team, which is now working with women's organisations to initiate a co-creation exercise for policy implementation. Eighteen WLOs and LGBTQI+ representatives have participated in this dialogue, along with collectives of women scientists, women athletes, and members of the Feminist Diplomacy for Peace alliance. This collaboration between government and WLOs has collectively defined goals, themes, outcomes and actions of the FFP, and perhaps most importantly, progressed to the design of a participatory mechanism for implementation and monitoring co-owned by government and civil society. This is an essential step towards the institutionalisation of the policy to ensure its continuity beyond the agenda of the current government. Additionally, the active and consistent participation of women's movements and WLOs in monitoring and implementation is a platform from which WLOs can engage with future governments on policy issues. In the meantime, WLOs intend to leverage the FFP to promote strategic discussions among international, national and local nexus actors responding to affected populations in Colombia.

## **Women-led organisations and feminist foreign policy implementation**

The success of WLO engagement with the development – and planned implementation and monitoring – of Colombia's FFP raises a broader question of the differentiation between feminist approaches to domestic and foreign policy in Colombia. Participatory dialogue between government representatives and WLOs on implementation of the FFP must now be utilised as a forum for discussion of domestic policy implementation with other ministries and departments. The objective for WLOs is adoption of public policies consistent with comprehensive protection of the rights of women and girls in all their diversity, throughout the Colombian government. In order to achieve this, WLOs see three areas of work related to the FFP framework: implementing foreign policy actions in the region, e.g. drafting transnational protocols and agreements to address specific risks of trafficking and migration with regard to sexual exploitation and GBV; internal operational actions of the Vice-Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote greater participation of women in the diplomatic corps, strengthening human rights-based, feminist and intersectional approaches, et al.; and achieving coherence between a feminist international vision and a feminist vision within the internal state structure. This last area is not incorporated within the official axes of work developed by the Vice-Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and is led by WLOs in coordination with the other two action areas. The feminist principles promoted by the FFP must be mainstreamed into national and local state responses, and WLOs will continue to lobby for this workstream to be included in the official agenda of the FFP.

In order to advance this work, WLOs are building transnational roadmaps with WLOs in countries that have FFPs, and collaborating with those in neighbouring countries working towards adoption of feminist public policy. Within Colombia, the continuous participation of WLOs in FFP implementation and decision-making is essential to opening up spaces for women's movements and civil society participation in other state structures. WLOs are leveraging their participation in planning, decision-making and accountability exercises with the Vice-Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to explore participation in domestic policy structures. The work of WLOs in humanitarian response is a key entry point to line ministries coordinating with humanitarian sectors, particularly the Ministry of Health.

While development of the action plan for implementing of the FFP is in its initial stages, it is clear that significant resources will be required in order for WLOs to engage consistently and effectively in the process moving forward. The challenge of co-designing viable and strategic actions that give life to the policy and establish the foundations for subsequent phases to be developed in the next government (2026) require dedicated personnel and strategic planning across WLO alliances, followed by monitoring of implementation and progress. WLOs' ongoing work to strengthen the current document and action plan and their contributions to the conceptualisation of feminist approaches with other state bodies is essential. Finally, WLOs will continue to advocate for the FFP to directly address the triple nexus characterising current conditions in Colombia, strengthening and resourcing state initiatives and responses, in partnership with humanitarian action organisations including WLOs.

## Conclusion

The FFP process in Colombia has brought together WLOs working across different sectors to devise joint solutions to humanitarian needs and complex social phenomena. The creation of space for listening to WLOs by the Vice-Ministry of Foreign Affairs, along with the commitment shown to reflection and collective decision-making, stands as an example of good practice that could be expanded within government structures in Colombia and in the wider region.

However, while the Vice-Ministry of Foreign Affairs has committed to seeking resources for the FFP implementation during the current government, this does not include the staff and organisational costs of vital WLO contributions to the process. This funding shortfall is exacerbated by limited humanitarian funding streams in the Latin America region and limited funding support for women's movements. As such, the FFP also needs to include concrete actions to fund the work of civil society partners to the FFP, and more broadly, to promote flexible and multi-year funding for WLO policy implementation in Colombia.

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## Why does the humanitarian system continue to ignore the indigenous knowledge of women-led organisations?

### Dr Renu Adhikari

Indigenous knowledge is increasingly leveraged by development actors to inform programming, but there has been a notable lack of uptake by humanitarian actors. This is despite the significant gains to be made to humanitarian analysis, planning and response from utilising indigenous knowledge, and engaging with local knowledge stakeholders, such as women-led organisations (WLOs). The knowledge – not only

of a community's population size, density and characteristic data, but also the social and power dynamics in a community, the gaps and inequalities in need, and local strategies to develop solutions – are not only immediately available from local knowledge stakeholders, but come with access to and profound connection with the community, which are essential to rapid response in crisis and emergencies. Local knowledge depends on people having gone through different contexts, histories, processes and experiences together, and having learned from them collectively. It is difficult, if not impossible, for international actors to acquire the same level of investment in communities that is quasi-synonymous with local knowledge unless they have lived, worked and built relationships within them long enough to meet this consistent standard.<sup>1</sup>

Women's local knowledge, social networks and capacity to mobilise the community are an invaluable resource during a humanitarian response. Women's insights into local ecosystems and resource management can guide the creation of more effective and sustainable emergency response strategies, ensuring that efforts are culturally appropriate and ecologically sound. The level of knowledge of gender dynamics in a community and the gendered impact of disasters or crisis is fairly unique to local WLOs, generated through the systematic process of observing local conditions, experimenting with solutions and readapting to the changing political, socioeconomic and environmental local context.

In considering the contributions of WLOs to humanitarian action, many international actors reference proximity to women and girls in affected communities, our language skills, historical understanding or cultural competencies, though these are often referred to in isolation, as distinct attributes or separate skills, which can be called upon when convenient. What is more constructive is to understand these interrelated attributes as a larger whole, in order to increase the respect and appreciation for the contributions of WLOs by international actors and normalise requirements for indigenous knowledge to be incorporated into context analysis, project design, and evaluation.

## **Indigenous knowledge is crucial to better humanitarian response**

Donors and international agencies need to listen to feedback from WLOs about the uneven benefits of development programming and market-/business-led development interventions for marginalised people, the largest number among them being women and girls. Women in rural areas especially have been invisibilised by development and humanitarian actors, despite their expertise in developing coping strategies for diverse human-made humanitarian crises through which they have lived and supported their communities with too little assistance provided by international humanitarian action. WLOs being born of this essential work – often discounted as caring responsibilities rather than acknowledged as humanitarian response – is a challenge to the status quo, a public refusal of women and their communities to accept only what international actors deem is 'good enough'.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/integrating-local-knowledge-humanitarian-and-development-programming-perspectives-global-women-leaders-august-2023-enar>



A stress management and self-care session for earthquake-affected women from Nepal's Sanibheri Rural Municipality, December 2023. Credit: Renu Adhikari

While we have seen a gradual improvement in international actors' engagement with WLOs over time, we are not always listened to at the necessary stage of analysis of project development, and we do not see significant improvement in follow-up from international actors after desired information has been extracted. Our contributions to adaptive design and management are not properly heard during project implementation, and in the cases where WLOs are included in project design processes, we find that too often indigenous knowledge gets discarded by proposal development consultants who value 'internationally approved' design from other contexts over our knowledge and experiences of local context. The scientifically proven techniques used by indigenous women for climate change mitigation, food preservation, disaster management, medical assistance and farming are immensely valuable. However, their methods are often overshadowed by the rapid, packaged solutions commercialised by the multinational companies.

This article is based on experiences in Nepal, but it is in no way unique to Nepal. The practice of projects being designed by international organisations, then implemented by local actors such as WLOs, is ineffective both in promoting sustainable outcomes and in building local ownership. Project design needs to be at least flexible enough to be determined locally, especially with regard to gender-responsive contextualisation. It should build upon the already existing knowledge while having a clearly defined framework to secure donor funding commitments. Our measure of success is when the gap between western knowledge and indigenous knowledge is bridged, resulting in international actors learning and behaving differently, with better outcomes for the affected community and strengthened networks formed among local and international operational actors to avoid having to learn the same lesson repeatedly through failure.

Long-term, meaningful partnerships cannot exist at only certain moments in the humanitarian programme cycle but depend on continuous two-way communication between equally respected humanitarian actors. The needs of vulnerable communities targeted by humanitarian interventions during the implementation and monitoring phases must be included from the beginning of the cycle, by including holders of indigenous knowledge such as WLOs in the needs assessment and analysis, strategic planning, and resource mobilisation phases. So, too, must our inputs be included during operational review and evaluation, though in the interest of better programming and more effective response to community needs, two-way dialogue must be an ongoing feature of sustained communication that invites and celebrates the incorporation of indigenous knowledge in humanitarian programming.

Furthermore, these partnerships need to bridge the humanitarian–development–peace nexus in order to address the underlying conditions, such as poverty, gender inequality, marginalisation and environmental degradation, that create vulnerability to and during humanitarian crises. Addressing these vulnerabilities not only requires comprehensive humanitarian responses that prioritise the protection, assistance and empowerment of affected populations, but also long-term investments in the work of local actors such as WLOs building resilience, empowering and strengthening communities.

If international actors refuse to listen to and learn from WLOs, to understand coping strategies and community adaptation, how will better interventions be developed? Unfortunately, indigenous knowledge is rarely shared effectively due to a lack of sufficient time, money, or resources invested in knowledge management, particularly for WLOs, which can be overcome by closer partnerships between international actors and local actors sharing knowledge, capacity and resources.

## **A holistic appreciation of indigenous knowledge**

In addition to improved interest in meaningful engagement between humanitarian funders and decision-makers and WLOs, acceptance and respect for the indigenous knowledge of local knowledge stakeholders must be a starting point. Acceptance from outside actors that they are not going into a community to teach, but that knowledge already exists there, is essential if humanitarian actors are to learn sufficiently well to be of assistance to affected communities. Shifting the narrative from ‘donors and receivers’ to ‘co-learning partners’ is equally important to acknowledging and valuing the contribution of the knowledge holders. Appreciation of women and girls as critical local knowledge stakeholders is necessary to reposition them as agents of change, not passive ‘beneficiaries’ of humanitarian assistance. This repositioning also ensures that the humanitarian actors provide support that is genuinely beneficial and contextually appropriate, that the community can take forward, respecting the community’s long-term needs and existing knowledge. It prevents the imposition of temporary, less useful support that offers short-term solutions and fails to be sustainable.

There is an inconsistency in seeing the population as objects of study, and not as subjects of rights that could benefit from the information provided. It is a matter of class and status: the research carried out by the academy is more important than that carried out by a local women’s organisation. Respect for



the indigenous knowledge of women requires not only appreciating local understanding and wisdom, but also mindfully balancing power dynamics to actively create comfortable spaces for women to share their knowledge.

This creates another obstacle to outside actors' usual practice, where workshops to design new projects or to validate analysis for humanitarian planning may be held in capital cities where international staff are based, tender processes with trusted venues are already established for cost efficiency, and senior decision-makers may visit to provide remarks. Local knowledge stakeholders, such as local WLOs or women leaders from affected communities, can be formally included in such processes, but by the process remaining the same, the presence of these participants is achieved but not the participation that is really needed. In this case, established WLOs with a national profile can act as a needed link between facilitated processes at local level and external-facing opportunities with international actors, but not as a replacement for the inclusion of local women leaders. In the best case, processes can be adapted to begin with local consultation and participatory design in appropriate environments accessible to local knowledge stakeholders, which will then continue throughout the lifecycle of the project or process.

Interactions between local and international actors, such as consultations, partnerships, collaborations, and co-creation and co-leadership, should be much more frequent, substantive and meaningful. A variety of spaces in which to engage with international actors, such as smaller workshops where information is shared and conversations are deeper and more meaningful, will contribute to better outcomes for donors, international actors and local communities, particularly in rapid-onset crisis situations, where the lack of two-way communication and trust in local stakeholders to drive decision-making can be detrimental to reach and impact among women and girls. In the case of the 2022 earthquake in Jajarkot, lack of direct access to communicate with donors about urgent needs for the prevention and protection of women and girls during power outages led to significant delays in accessing funding to provide items requested by women and girls for safety, which should have been mainstreamed from the start of rapid emergency response activities. In such cases, WLOs as the conduit between donor agencies and the local community receive immediate feedback from the community about what they need, and about the quality of the items that they receive, and it is essential that donors listen to WLOs when they relay this information so that swift adaptive or corrective action can be taken. Local actors appreciate when international actors take their local knowledge into consideration, address a mistake, invite them to contribute to the evaluation of response activities, consult with them before they publish any of their research, and invite them to the spaces in which they release jointly developed research. They also appreciate opportunities to contribute to shadow reporting processes, such as for the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).<sup>2</sup>

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2 <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/integrating-local-knowledge-humanitarian-and-development-programming-perspectives-global-women-leaders-august-2023-enar>

## Conclusion

There are incremental learning opportunities and changes in how the humanitarian sector does business that can make a difference if seized upon in a meaningful way. Moving from shallow to meaningful commitments, and recognising the potential of indigenous knowledge for bringing about more effective, inclusive and sustainable response to crises are the first steps. Perhaps by recognising the contributions of WLOs and local knowledge stakeholders, donors could prioritise creating networks of solidarity in the communities they fund in. This is particularly important in emergency situations, as competition for funds often increases in these scenarios, so donors should play a role in maintaining cohesion and cooperation among all partners, with local stakeholders at the centre, rather than at the end point of implementation. Most important of all in the journey towards sustained, structural transformation of the humanitarian system centred around community needs, priorities, knowledge and capacity is respect for humanitarian actors of all kinds, and recognition of the work that we do.

**Dr Renu Adhikari** is a founding chairperson of the Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC) and a noted feminist activist in country. Dr Adhikari would like to acknowledge Megan Kelly's work in influencing this article.

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## Women-led initiatives in the Middle East and North Africa

### Layla Naffa

Discrimination against women and girls in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region permeates our lives, at home, at work, in our communities and within society at large. Despite some legislative and institutional advancements, entrenched discrimination persists, often reinforced by social norms, economic constraints, and emergencies such as the Covid-19 pandemic. **Gender inequality** is deeply ingrained in Arab societies, manifested in various forms of abuse across familial, communal, educational and workplace settings. Notions of honour often dictate women's behaviour, with perceived transgressions leading to violence, stigma and isolation. Religious misconceptions may further perpetuate harmful practices, and access to rights and services is often contingent upon male guardianship, limiting women's autonomy. In the MENA region, women and girls are too often seen by humanitarian actors only as victims and survivors of crisis and passive beneficiaries of assistance.

However, women are in fact the first responders in crisis situations, providing immediate assistance, protection and support to their families and communities. Women are powerful agents of change, and their effective engagement can make humanitarian responses transformative. Women's groups and women-led organisations (WLOs) have skills and experience to support populations affected by crisis, as they have a pre-existing presence in and relationships with local communities. WLOs are an integral

part of community protection mechanisms providing services, as well as protection and empowerment programming, that uplift women and meet survivors' needs. Despite the extensive experience, leadership and contributions to humanitarian response of WLOs such as the Arab Women Organization of Jordan (AWO), WLOs are often sidelined by the humanitarian system, and United Nations agencies, international non-governmental organisations and donor stakeholders fail to build equal partnerships with them. The pivotal role of WLOs in humanitarian response continues to be overlooked and undervalued even as WLOs' unique perspectives, approaches and resilience are shaping a more inclusive and effective response to humanitarian challenges in the MENA region.

## **The Arab Women Organization**

The Arab Women Organization of Jordan (AWO) is a women-led non-profit and non-governmental organisation (NGO) founded in 1970, with the goal of supporting women to achieve equal rights and eliminating violence against women. AWO's vision is 'Ending discrimination and violence against women in Jordan where gender equality, social justice and inclusive democracy are valued as well as the participation of all, women and men, in development'. Throughout its more than 50 years of history, AWO has been working with and for Jordanian women, focused on the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment by implementing activities to end discrimination and violence against women and by increasing women's participation in promoting development, democracy and human rights, as well as promoting Agenda 2030, by connecting gender equality (Goal 5) with other Sustainable Development Goals. AWO engages women activists and other WLOs to serve vulnerable communities, including economically disadvantaged women, women survivors of violence and refugee women and girls. AWO has three main workstreams: Economic and Environmental Empowerment; Political Empowerment, Leadership, Advocacy, Monitoring and Evaluation; and the Gender Responsive Humanitarian and Development Program. Through its programmes, AWO demonstrates the capacity to share knowledge and expertise, and to develop new models for sustainable gender-sensitive development.

## **AWO and its partnerships**

AWO has expanded the reach and impact of its work by developing partnerships, both within Jordan and throughout the MENA region. Through cooperation with diverse types of networks and committees on the national, regional and global levels, AWO has sought to strengthen the interrelated and complementary work of women across the Arab world to promote gender equality and women's empowerment, and to voice their needs and demands in a more powerful and aligned way. WLOs in the MENA region are connected by a tradition of solidarity among women's rights movements in the region, shared language and cultural context. AWO is a member of the EuroMed Feminist Initiative, founded in 2004, which includes more than 200 organisations working across the Euro-Mediterranean region to promote women's rights and gender equality, advocating for policy change and empowering women at the grassroots level. It is also a member of the El Karama Arab Feminist network of human rights organisations and activists, founded in 2005 to advocate for the rights of women and girls. In 2010, AWO founded the Mosawa Network, a local network of rural women-led NGOs in Jordan, to apply

the benefits of cooperation and capacity-sharing among Jordanian women's organisations and activists working together to advance women's rights and gender equality in the country. Through Mosawa, AWO supports strong community mobilisation efforts and leads nationwide advocacy efforts to achieve changes in the lives of women and girls in Jordan.

## **Cultivating coordination**

AWO believes that it is critical to reinforce coordination among WLOs in the MENA region, giving WLOs more opportunities to strengthen cross-organisation advocacy initiatives and to scale WLO-led interventions within the region. However, while the existing platforms have helped increase the recognition and influence of WLOs and activists in the region, these networks, such as EuroMed and El Karama, are largely unknown within the humanitarian system, with limited opportunities for WLOs to engage in humanitarian decision-making at a regional level.

This lack of engagement between organisations working on human rights and gender inequality issues and humanitarian actors responding to communities affected by crisis, led to critical gaps in the understanding of the root causes of patterns of vulnerability and experiences of violence that international humanitarian actors reported and aimed to respond to in the MENA region. Needs assessments and consultative processes in the MENA region lack adequate tools to assess crises' consequences for women and girls. Agencies fail to constitute gender-balanced teams to collect data and do not reach the most vulnerable women and girls. The lack of meaningful participation and leadership of women and girls in the humanitarian system and lack of adequate sex- and age-disaggregated data hinders the design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of gender-focused interventions that address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of women in all their diversity, and prevents sustainability in the long run. When humanitarian actors enhance their ability to engage directly with WLOs, it results in interest from the broader humanitarian community and a better understanding of national gender-based violence (GBV) contexts and specificities.

AWO set out to demonstrate the value of WLOs in internally coordinated humanitarian platforms in the MENA region, through its own participation in the Whole of Syria response coordination platform in Jordan and by co-chairing the MENA region GBV network with the UN Population Fund (UNFPA). Notably, in 2020 AWO developed Arab Women Lead, a transformative approach to GBV prevention in the MENA region that embraces the leadership, knowledge and capacities of WLOs in humanitarian response and provides the necessary resources to equip emerging WLOs with the training, technical support and institutional strengthening that they seek. The MENA region is affected by a number of cross-border crises, including in Gaza, Iraq and Syria, and Arab Women Lead was developed to expand participation by WLOs in humanitarian planning and decision-making, and strengthening coordination among WLOs responding to humanitarian needs across the region.

The initiative is centred on a capacity-sharing approach: WLOs access opportunities for strengthening their own organisations and mobilising funding for their humanitarian response activities, exchanging experiences and supporting WLOs in nearby and neighbouring contexts, via engagement with national

and international humanitarian systems. Arab Women Lead demonstrates the greater impact of WLO efforts in the MENA region due to the additional support and coordination among WLOs spanning the divide between indigenous regional networks and internationally coordinated humanitarian platforms, especially given that regional coordination is dominated by the Syria response, which leads to a lack of humanitarian coordination between Arab contexts. The initiative set out to demonstrate to international humanitarian agencies and their donors that where humanitarian actors enhance their ability to engage directly with WLOs, it results in better understanding of local contexts and specificities, especially with regards to gender inequality and the root causes of GBV. During the first phase of Arab Women Lead, there was unprecedented engagement of local WLOs in Arabic-language GBV technical training, with 113 representatives of WLOs from Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine participating in trainings provided by AWO on the GBV Minimum Standards and GBV Case Management in 2021 and 2022. In addition, the initiative has significantly increased participation by WLOs from the MENA region in global coordination and advocacy initiatives, including the Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies and the GBV Community of Practice, to advocate for the needs of GBV actors and women and girls at risk of GBV in the MENA region.

Prior to the Arab Women Lead initiative, only minimal technical GBV tools and resources were available in Arabic, despite pressing needs in the region. The GBV Minimum Standards facilitation guide developed by UNFPA, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and partners was translated into Arabic by AWO, and the first Training of Trainers in Arabic took place in Amman, Jordan, in 2021. It was followed by further trainings delivered by WLO trainers in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine in 2022. Through the initiative, WLOs in the MENA region have improved their profile, direct engagement with donors, and meaningful participation in humanitarian decision-making and response.

## **Conclusion**

The journey of women-led initiatives in the Middle East and North Africa region, exemplified by organisations like the Arab Women Organization of Jordan, reflects both the enduring challenges and the potential for transformative change through multi-stakeholder platforms. Through strategic partnerships and initiatives like Arab Women Lead, AWO has spearheaded efforts to amplify the voices of WLOs, contribute to coordination among WLOs within the region, and connect WLOs with resources in the GBV sector previously unavailable in Arabic.

The success of Arab Women Lead not only underscores the importance of WLO-led regional initiatives, but also highlights the power of collaboration and solidarity among women's movements. By sharing tools, training and support with WLOs in the MENA region, AWO has provided proof of concept that WLOs are able to play an active role in shaping humanitarian agendas, advocating for the rights of women and girls, and driving sustainable change when they have access to the resources to do so.

It is imperative that the humanitarian community recognises and embraces the expertise, perspectives and leadership of WLOs, and the importance of looking at the root causes of conflict and violence through the lens of culture, history and society within the region. Only through sharing understanding

can local and international partners manage to build more resilient and equitable societies in the MENA region and beyond. The work of women-led initiatives in the MENA region demonstrates the expertise, resilience and power of women to drive meaningful change, in society and the humanitarian sector.

**Layla Naffa** is the Director of Programmes at the Arab Women Organization of Jordan.

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## Creating space for gender in the Grand Bargain and the humanitarian system

### **Naomi Tulay-Solanke**



Naomi Tulay-Solanke speaking at a sexual and reproductive health and rights event for young people hosted by the Community Healthcare Initiative, in Monrovia, Liberia. Credit: Naomi Tulay-Solanke

The Friends of Gender Group (FoGG) is a collaborative platform of humanitarian agencies working to advance gender equality within the framework of the Grand Bargain, the global agreement created by humanitarian agencies in May 2016 to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian action. Established during the Grand Bargain Sherpa Meeting in Bonn in September 2016, the group evolved from a small cohort of Grand Bargain signatories to a diverse network co-chaired by two local women leaders representing women-led organisations (WLOs) in the Global South: Naomi Tulay-Solanke of the Community Healthcare Initiative (Liberia) representing the Feminist Humanitarian Network, and Fatima Shehu Imam of Rehabilitation Empowerment and Better Health Initiative (REBHI) in Nigeria. Like

the Grand Bargain, FoGG's membership is made up of a cross-section of humanitarian actors: donor governments, international organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), though FoGG membership has also been open to WLOs who are not formal signatories to the Grand Bargain since 2019.

During the past eight years, members of the group have advocated for the integration of gender perspectives across Grand Bargain initiatives, urging signatories to integrate gender considerations into their policies, programmes and funding mechanisms. FoGG members engage with political, technical and bureaucratic structures of the Grand Bargain in the spirit of the platform's mission: solving seemingly impossible obstacles and challenges impeding humanitarian response by tackling difficult discussions with donors, United Nations agencies and NGOs together. The FoGG has worked persistently to leverage the Grand Bargain platform in order to institutionalise gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls across all phases of humanitarian response and recovery, using it as a catalyst for the implementation of existing global commitments and standards on gender equality, particularly through accurate and timely reporting by signatories.

The FoGG's contributions to the Grand Bargain are documented through the Annual Independent Report on the Grand Bargain, **most recently prepared by ODI**. Convening regularly to share ideas and look strategically across Grand Bargain commitments to advocate for the strengthening of individual and collective commitments, FoGG members developed priority areas of engagement (formerly known as workstreams) to advance gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in humanitarian settings consistently across Grand Bargain initiatives. FoGG members have advocated for:

- gender-sensitive approaches in needs assessments to mitigate the impact of pre-existing gender inequalities during crisis and to promote more inclusive and effective response efforts;
- gender-mainstreaming in all sectors of humanitarian response, including shelter, health, food security, education and livelihoods, by advocating for the integration of gender analysis and gender-responsive programming across sectors to address the specific needs and priorities of women and girls;
- enhancing the leadership and participation of women affected by crisis in humanitarian decision-making processes, particularly through the work of FoGG members in the localisation workstream and caucus.

Engagement of FoGG members in the original workstreams on localisation, cash, participation revolution, and needs assessments yielded positive outcomes, but reporting and results were more varied.

## **Addressing the gender gap**

The central issue around which the FoGG was formed is the absence of explicit gender commitments within the Grand Bargain. In 2018, FoGG successfully advocated for the inclusion of increased self-reporting on gender for signatories in the annual reporting process. Resistance from some actors to the increased reporting option cited the lack of explicit gender commitments in the Grand Bargain. This structural gap within the platform has been repeatedly raised by group members, including at annual meetings, particularly during the development of the Grand Bargain 2.0 in 2021.

The lack of a central point of leadership or accountability for gender within the Grand Bargain has posed a significant hurdle to FoGG members since its inception. While the FoGG was formed to initiate discussions among signatories regarding the structural gaps on gender within the Grand Bargain, the formation of the group was not seen as an end in itself, but as a modality for advocacy, coordination and knowledge-sharing among like-minded humanitarian actors who saw the potential of the Grand Bargain platform to promote gender-transformative humanitarian action. However, the work of the group has continuously been dominated by carving out space for gender within the Grand Bargain, so that it has not been able to move past addressing the structural concerns of the platform. While some progress was made in increasing attention on the importance of gender commitments under the tenure of Grand Bargain Eminent Person Sigrid Kaag between 2019 and 2021, the absence of sustained leadership undermines efforts to institutionalise gender-mainstreaming. Furthermore, gender equality and women's empowerment have received less prominence in Grand Bargain processes and dialogues in the 2.0 framework. Despite the adoption of gender-specific actions in the 2.0 framework, the same challenges remain in holding signatories accountable for implementation and self-reporting.

One of the factors that has impeded the progress of the FoGG is the absence of a regular champion within the Grand Bargain Steering Committee to table and promote proposals for the advancement of gender considerations. As part of the Grand Bargain 2.0 drafting process, the group proposed the development of a monitoring framework integrating gender indicators throughout its pillars, to enable tracking and reporting on collective commitments to advance gender equality and women's leadership, which did not gain traction. Following successive attempts to lobby Steering Committee members to bring Grand Bargain structures and initiatives into line with normative frameworks incorporating gender commitments, such as Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) policies and Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD), FoGG began to appeal more broadly to Grand Bargain signatories to each establish agency-specific targets to report on progress made towards gender commitments. Members continue to encourage Grand Bargain stakeholders to scale up strategic action, including funding for the advancement of gender equality in crisis and humanitarian settings, despite the challenge of competing against multiple priorities for signatories' attention without a political champion.

## Conclusion

The FoGG, seeking to advance a more equitable humanitarian agenda through the Grand Bargain platform, has worked strategically to strengthen synergies between Grand Bargain commitments and global normative frameworks, prioritising intersectional approaches, and enhancing accountability mechanisms. By fostering partnerships and collaboration among local, national and international gender-responsive actors, the strategy of the group has been to utilise Grand Bargain structures and openings to build a more gender-responsive humanitarian system better equipped to meet the diverse needs of crisis-affected populations. In the absence of space to realise these objectives through Grand Bargain 2.0 structures, the FoGG is now evolving to better support the work of its members in driving change in the humanitarian system.

**Naomi Tulay-Solanke** is Founder and Executive Director of the Community Healthcare Initiative.



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## Women-led organisations responding across the nexus in the Venezuela crisis

### Beatriz Borges

The complex humanitarian emergency in Venezuela since 2015 has disproportionately affected women and girls, exacerbating existing inequalities and exposing vulnerable women and girls to increased risks of violence due to economic hardship, food insecurity, absence of rule of law, educational disruption and lack of access to healthcare. The crisis has expanded the roles and responsibilities of women – requiring them to develop solutions to feed their families in the face of hyperinflation and a collapsed health system – and of adolescent girls, who are often required to take on the roles of adults and caretakers in the absence of their mothers. The crisis has further exacerbated gender-based violence (GBV), including domestic violence, sexual assault and trafficking, as economic stress, social instability, and breakdowns in law enforcement have contributed to heightened levels of violence against women and girls. Furthermore, the lack of access to support services, such as shelters and counselling, leaves survivors without essential resources for safety and recovery.

### The complex context in Venezuela

Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive humanitarian interventions that prioritise the specific needs and rights of women and girls, including access to essential services, protection from violence, economic opportunities, and opportunities for education and empowerment. However, the Maduro government has ignored offers of international cooperation and humanitarian aid, instead criminalising these efforts, despite the demands of the people affected. **Underfunding** of the humanitarian response is a significant concern, and ongoing restrictions on international cooperation and aid continues to weaken the response, while the impacts of the humanitarian emergency on the Venezuelan population grow more severe. The restriction of humanitarian aid has raised significant human rights concerns, particularly regarding access to essential services such as food, medicine and healthcare. The Venezuelan population has suffered from shortages of basic necessities, leading to widespread hardship on key populations suffering from deprivations that damage or put at risk their lives, integrity, security, freedoms and human dignity, while humanitarian aid has been used as a political tool to maintain power and control the distribution of resources. Of **20.2 million** people with humanitarian and protection needs, 14.2 million have critical needs in different areas of their lives, with different degrees of severity, with a total of 4.2 million people reaching severe needs thresholds. Inoperative health services and a lack of resources impede women's access to healthcare while women choose to prioritise food expenses for their household over the cost of medication for themselves.

**Eight out of 10 women** consider the amount of food they bring home as deficient, scarce or very scarce, according to research by Centro de Justicia y Paz (Center for Justice and Peace or CEPAZ), a Venezuelan women-led organisation (WLO) working in the humanitarian and human rights sectors. This finding is

despite the fact that 6 out of 10 women reported spending almost the entire family budget on food, with 76% saying that at least one person in their family is malnourished. Women employ various strategies to acquire food, including buying on credit, borrowing food or money, reducing portion sizes, reducing the number of meals per day, or reducing expenses on health, education, or other items. Alongside the strains of managing household feeding and the needs of family members, women are victims of family violence, with psychological violence being the most prevalent type, followed by physical, symbolic, economic, and sexual violence. Only 31% of the women who reported being victims of violence reported or denounced the incidents, with fear of reprisals and distrust of institutions being the main reasons for not reporting.

Early patterns of men's migration out of Venezuela led to both shifts in, and the exacerbation of, traditional gender roles for Venezuelan women. Women heads of household are now the **majority**, with responsibility for young children and other dependents as both primary caregivers and primary providers. The shift in gender roles within Venezuelan families has increased the decision-making and leadership of women in their households, but has also led to increased care burdens and workloads which deepens reliance on negative coping strategies including transactional sex and exposure to violence, increasing the vulnerability of women and their dependents.

## **Bureaucratic impediments to humanitarian assistance**

Venezuela requires civil society groups to abide by a wide array of regulations through as many as **40 laws**. In May 2024, a second reading of the draft Law on Supervision, Regularization, Performance and Financing of Non-Profit Social Organizations, which would strip all non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil associations of their legal status and force them to reapply from scratch in a new registry, was held by the government-controlled legislature. The bill would allow the state greater control over organised civil society through a series of complex requirements including handling lists of members, donors and assets.

The proposed law is similar to an existing Nicaraguan law that has led to the elimination of thousands of NGOs, including the Nicaraguan Red Cross and charitable Catholic congregations. Many NGOs, especially civil society organisations (CSOs) including WLOs, would not be able to fulfil the new requirements, forcing them to close. The National Assembly is also considering another bill that would create an agency to regulate 'international cooperation' and a fund to hold all international donations. The bill includes a new system of sanctions specifically aimed at national civil society in Venezuela, with the power to 'prohibit, suspend, restrict or definitively eliminate' any association that, under the discretion of the Executive, is considered to promote or participate directly or indirectly in activities contrary to the interests of the government, and establishes evaluations that determine the application of these sanctions.

The Law for the Defense of the Political Sovereignty, Self-determination, and Territorial Integrity of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela includes the possibility of annulling the obligations and commitments of the state in agreements with international cooperation organisations in case the latter fail to suit the purposes of the bill. Under a new system of authorisation, a 'compulsory registration integrated system',

the government would manage recognition of associations as possible recipients or participants in activities of international cooperation, giving the agency discretion over which NGO activities would receive funding and denying millions of people in need of humanitarian assistance access to the support offered by the international community.

The bill would make the government solely responsible for receiving, transferring and exchanging human resources, goods, services, funding and technology from NGOs, and make use of them following the priorities and discretionary criteria of the National Executive Branch, through the creation of a fund under its administration that would raise, lend and manage the resources coming from or dedicated to international cooperation. This would be catastrophic for Venezuelan civil society and international agencies providing humanitarian assistance to **seven million** people in need, and would likely reduce the humanitarian funding provided by international donors to Venezuela due to the incompatibility with **good humanitarian donorship** and **humanitarian principles** more broadly.

## **The essential work of women-led organisations**

Despite onerous restrictions on CSOs in Venezuela, WLOs are key agents of change within Venezuelan civil society and increasingly shaping humanitarian response within displaced and migrant communities. The breakdown of democratic institutions, enforcement of restrictive laws that severely limit the operation of CSOs, and threats against human rights defenders and CSOs have led to thousands of CSO staff and activists leaving Venezuela over the past decade. This has necessitated the reformation and adaptation of networks and mechanisms to enable WLOs to continue working and supporting vulnerable women and girls within Venezuela and the wider region. WLOs operating in exile are at the forefront of advocacy efforts for peace, reconciliation and social justice in Venezuela, sharing learning, training and strategies in real time.

Only **300,000** women and girls have been targeted for humanitarian assistance by United Nations partners over the course of 2024, out of an estimated 4.1 million in need. WLOs play a pivotal role in providing essential services to Venezuelan women and girls in need of international protection: holding knowledge from local contexts, centring women's experiences and perspectives, and challenging traditional power structures to push for gender-responsive policies and programmes. Inside Venezuela, WLOs are on the frontlines, delivering critical humanitarian assistance to vulnerable communities: from distributing food aid and medical supplies to providing psychosocial support, legal assistance and support for survivors of GBV. WLOs often combine humanitarian action and human rights protection, working across the humanitarian–development–peace nexus to do vital work advocating for the human rights of vulnerable women and girls and contributing to social and political transformation through standing for electoral office and engaging in civic participation. WLOs foster solidarity and resilience among community members, strengthening social cohesion and collective action. By creating safe spaces for dialogue, mutual support and collaboration, WLOs build networks of solidarity and promote grassroots initiatives for community-led mutual aid.

Cross-border mass displacement has left millions of women and girls without access to basic services and protection. The perilous **migration routes** encountered by individuals fleeing Venezuela expose hundreds of thousands of women and girls to heightened risks of exploitation, trafficking and violence. Venezuelan migrant and refugee-led WLOs and WLOs led by women from neighbouring countries work to amplify the voices of women and girls affected by the crisis, advocating for their rights and needs in the planning and execution of humanitarian strategies and programmes. The severity of GBV risks faced by refugee and migrant women and girls – including **femicide** – in Central America and Mexico is compounded by the presence of transnational organised criminal groups along main transit routes, which pose further security and operational challenges to international GBV service providers. Lack of documentation leads to fear of deportation and retaliation among GBV survivors if they report violence and exploitation to agencies cooperating with government entities.



CEPAZ representatives celebrating International Day of Peace 2017. Credit: CEPAZ

Within the regional crisis response, 22 out of 86 current GBV sector partners are refugee- and migrant-led organisations providing community-based services in GBV prevention and response, in addition to programmes empowering women and girls to become agents of change in their communities. Skills training, education programmes and income-generating activities are especially important to counter barriers to formal livelihoods in host countries and develop alternatives to transactional sex. By promoting women's leadership and participation in decision-making spaces throughout the response cycle, WLOs foster a culture of empowerment and accountability that supports women and girls to build positive coping strategies through adaptive problem-solving and resilience building that reduce their vulnerability to violence.

## Conclusion

Venezuelan WLOs working in-country, in the region, and in exile are contributing to humanitarian response alongside their work promoting dialogue, reconciliation and respect for human rights through peacebuilding and conflict-resolution initiatives. CEPAZ engages at a global level with human rights instruments to highlight the need to implement the Women, Peace and Security agenda in the Venezuela context due to the characteristics of the crisis. By advocating for an inclusive and gender-sensitive approach to peacebuilding that recognises the unique perspectives and contributions of women in building sustainable peace in Venezuela, WLOs are working to address the root causes of conflict and violence. Through their humanitarian programming, WLOs are addressing the differential impact of the complex humanitarian emergency on women and girls in Venezuela, and working to promote gender equality and the realisation of women's rights. The contribution of WLOs working across humanitarian and human rights response has enhanced the prevention and mitigation of protection risks, and allowed humanitarian actors to better respond to the urgent protection needs of women and girls in Venezuela and the wider region. However, the large scale of unmet needs continues to grow, while the July 2024 Venezuela presidential election grows closer. WLOs are calling for increased preparedness planning by humanitarian actors in the region, in anticipation of increased population flows out of Venezuela creating a surge in pressure on monitoring and services. What is needed now is for fellow humanitarian actors to follow the lead of WLOs and to improve coordination and cooperation to better support the rights and needs of Venezuelan people together.

**Beatriz Borges** is the Director of Centro de Justicia y Paz (the Center for Justice and Peace).

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## Tackling threats and violence against women-led organisations

**Oumou Salif Touré**



A monthly meeting of women and girls – referred to as ‘the circle of power’ – at FemiLead’s headquarters in Bamako, Mali. Credit: Oumou Salif-Toure

Women-led organisations (WLOs) working in humanitarian contexts face pervasive harassment and intimidation, hindering their vital work delivering humanitarian assistance, assessing the needs of affected women and girls, and addressing manifestations of gender inequality that increase risk and vulnerability during crises. Diverse groups and organisations, ranging from grassroots volunteer-led initiatives to registered organisations with funding from international donors, continue to be subjected to various forms of harassment – including targeted intimidation, physical threats, online abuse, surveillance and legal threats – with the purpose of silencing WLO voices and maintaining the status quo. The **gender-transformative** work of WLOs such as **FemiLead Mali** threatens existing structures and power relations, which are distorted by the anti-rights movement as an attack on society and culture.

Based on my own experience in Mali working on gender-based violence (GBV) prevention, reproductive health and advocacy as the head of FemiLead Mali, various harassment tactics are utilised by the domestic anti-rights movement in an attempt to disrupt the work of WLOs. In Mali, GBV service

providers have worked for many years advocating for formal passage of a law criminalising GBV, and I have been a visible proponent of the GBV law. Opponents have been ferocious in targeting my organisation with threats and harassment, demanding that we stop speaking about GBV and reproductive health, and to shut down the work that we do to prevent and respond to GBV in Mali. The modalities of harassment from hostile actors have ranged from online acts of nuisance and disinformation to in-person threats of violence against family members and damage to property.

While advocates from WLOs like myself have been increasingly welcomed into international policy spaces to share our work and experiences via global platforms such as Génération Égalité, Prevention of Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (PSVI) and the Call to Action on Protection from GBV in Emergencies, the backlash to this work at country level is fuelled by external communications from such events that spotlight the contributions of attendees from the Global South in order to affirm the importance of partnering with WLOs. Indeed, many WLO representatives, including myself, embrace the opportunity to increase the impact of our engagement in such forums in order to network with potential funders and influence decision-making. Unfortunately, these events are increasingly less likely to open opportunities to access project and organisational funding, even as the communication from such events increases fodder for anti-rights movements at country level. Social media platforms have become a theatre for the relentless online harassment of women activists and WLOs by those aiming to silence the voices of WLOs and monopolise the energies and resources of our staff, partners and funders. Threats of violence and derogatory comments are directed to staff of WLOs as well as to individual activists, contributing to a climate of fear intended to discourage staff, volunteers and clients from working with and for WLOs.

## **System of threats and harassment**

The harassment faced by WLOs in emergency and crisis contexts is reflective of the upheaval in power dynamics and political insecurity, along with the broader systemic impediments to women's political participation pre-crisis. Deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes, legal and institutional barriers, conflict-related insecurity, and socioeconomic disparities make up the system of exclusion that WLOs navigate day to day. Threats to the rights and safety of women associated with gender work, such as those working with WLOs, are an acute manifestation of the structural challenges experienced by women and girls at large. While instances of harassment are too often dismissed as spontaneous manifestations of prevailing negative attitudes towards women speaking out in public forums, in fact gendered harassment against women leaders is strategic and intended to silence WLOs.

This harassment takes place within the context of narrowing political space for women's activism in Mali and an energy crisis that limits our ability to work, particularly our connection to regional and global discourses conducted online. Yet, even mentioning these restrictive conditions is grounds for further threats. The volatile environment created by ongoing instability restricts the ability of women activists to mobilise, organise and advocate for their rights. Women face discrimination and barriers to accessing leadership positions, participating in decision-making forums, and exercising their rights, despite legal frameworks and international commitments to promote gender equality and protect women's rights.

Women continue to face legal barriers, discriminatory practices, and impunity for perpetrators of violence and discrimination. Without direct access to political power, the only space available to gender actors such as WLOs to call for change is civil society.

## **Threatened women-led organisations in the humanitarian sector**

Gendered threats and harassment used to silence women associated with WLOs have become increasingly normalised, which has a chilling effect on the external advocacy and public profile of the broader humanitarian sector, especially gender and protection actors. Staff of humanitarian organisations working on GBV prevention and reproductive rights are less likely to coordinate with WLO partners in the sector, due to concerns regarding the risk to the organisation's reputation and public profile. At the same time, WLO staff have to be preoccupied with potential risks to their personal and organisational security. Despite the strategic benefits of coordinating and sharing information with humanitarian actors, WLOs are obliged to censor their contributions or participation in humanitarian spaces because of security risks from accidental or purposeful transmission of information from supposedly secure meetings, such as lists of participants and agendas from humanitarian planning discussions. This further entrenches the vicious cycle of the low profile of WLOs as humanitarian actors, and creates further obstacles to WLOs contributing important information to needs analysis in conflict settings, as well as further diminishing their access to humanitarian funding opportunities.

## **Funding challenges**

While WLOs and feminist activists have become accustomed to harassment, threats and violence in the course of our work, we continue to face a lack of understanding from funders about our indirect cost needs related to physical security, staff wellbeing and training, and online safety. Only 0.3% of bilateral aid in conflict-affected and fragile states goes to women's rights organisations and WLOs, yet WLOs carry the bulk of the burden of opposition from proponents of traditional values and anti-feminist sentiment. The time and resources required by WLOs who face constant opposition to gender-transformative work, especially in fragile and conflict settings, exceeds donor expectations, especially regarding strategies to prevent staff burnout and resignation. The impact of sexual harassment in public spaces, slander in media and at community level, and threats against family members is a significant impediment to the work of WLOs, compounded by the direct impact of threats and harassment on property, offices and assets.

Though WLOs are at the forefront of gender-transformative humanitarian action to influence and change gender inequality in crisis and emergency contexts, WLO access to humanitarian funding streams is limited by perceptions within the international humanitarian community that WLOs are not humanitarian actors. International delineations and definitions of what characterises a humanitarian actor have traditionally included a disengagement of a humanitarian organisation from politics and social movements in the context of humanitarian response. Often the experience of threats and harassment by WLOs is interpreted as political liability by humanitarian agencies too often discouraged by the array of activities conducted by WLOs in their work. Despite the humanitarian–development–peace nexus



mandate, international humanitarian agencies seek an easy separation between (largely) international humanitarian actors and local development actors, despite the essential work of civil society organisations, human rights defenders and activists in agitating for response to humanitarian needs and in addressing the root causes of violence.

In the absence of access to humanitarian funding streams to resource their work on protection of women and girls in humanitarian emergencies, WLOs receiving grant funding internationally are more commonly associated with human rights funders. The customary reliance by WLOs on funding pathways focused on human rights contributes to the misrepresentation, and resulting repudiation, of WLOs as agents of foreign objectives, working against their own culture and society. In particular, sensitivity to terminology related to human rights instruments and even the name of funding organisations highlights attention on the work of grantees, and further entrenches the characterisation of an organisation's work by opponents. Access to humanitarian funding allocated at national level, such as pooled funds, would enable WLOs to diversify their funding streams and help combat mis- and disinformation regarding the objectives of protection and health programming. It would also contribute to improved tracking of humanitarian funding to WLOs, as funding streams from the human rights sector utilised by WLOs in their humanitarian work are not being reflected.

## **Conclusion: moving ahead**

Facing the threats against WLOs in the humanitarian sector requires increased coordination and trust-building between international and local humanitarian actors, as well as improved understanding and funding of the humanitarian work of WLOs. Support for women's leadership, political representation and civic engagement is vital alongside holding space for WLO participation in humanitarian planning and decision-making processes. Equally, donors must address the increased security and protection needs of WLOs working in the humanitarian sector instead of distancing themselves from these risks. The humanitarian sector does not stand as an island separated from the society and reality it works in – humanitarian agencies are also responsible for holding perpetrators of violence and intimidation accountable and creating safe spaces for women to exercise their rights. WLOs are at the forefront of this work, promoting positive representations of women's leadership and empowering women to challenge gender-based discrimination and inequality. Working together, the humanitarian community can mobilise international support and solidarity to address the challenges faced by WLOs.

**Oumou Salif Touré** is the Director of FemiLead Mali.

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## Cultivating psychological safety: fostering better partnerships with women-led organisations

**Maria Luisa Ramirez**

In the dynamic landscape of humanitarian action, psychological safety emerges as a foundational element that has often been overlooked within the sector. Creating an environment where people can voice concerns and propose solutions without apprehension is crucial, especially in settings characterised by uncertainty, a condition all too familiar in the humanitarian sector. This principle of psychological safety extends beyond internal team dynamics, to the relationships between women-led organisations (WLOs) and international agencies and donors in the humanitarian system. Establishing psychological safety in these interactions is key, as it builds a foundation of open communication that can enhance collaboration and potentially strengthen the impact of humanitarian efforts. By promoting transparent dialogue as well as mutual respect and trust, we can unlock more opportunities for mutual learning that highlight the unique contributions that WLOs bring to the table.

### **Psychological safety**

In technical terms, psychological safety describes individuals' perceptions of the consequences they could face when taking interpersonal risks in work-related settings. Interpersonal risks can be understood as asking questions or making mistakes; being able to do so without shame or embarrassment enables people to better connect, engage, change and learn in the workplace. Essentially, psychological safety is about how people feel when they take social risks in a work environment, such as sharing new ideas or speaking up, without the fear of being judged or worrying about negative consequences. For example, in a collaborative team with high psychological safety, a member can suggest a new approach to solve a problem without worrying about their colleagues dismissing the idea or being admonished if the approach does not work. Similarly, another team member can openly admit mistakes they have made rather than hiding them, which can potentially lead to a productive discussion on how to avoid similar situations in the future. In the longer term, when this team member admits their mistake, it may even prevent furthering its negative results and corrective actions may be taken on time. In climates of psychological safety, individuals are more likely not only to admit mistakes but also to offer ideas, provide feedback and ask for help, as they perceive it to be safe to do so in collaborative relationships.

In contrast, within a low psychological safety context, a member of a team might notice a significant flaw in the design of a social project as it may lack cultural sensitivity and it has overlooked existing local services. However, due to past experiences where colleagues were reproached for pointing out problems, this team member might feel anxious about reporting the issue. Fearing the possible negative

consequences of speaking up, such as risking their job, they may decide to remain silent and the issue remains unaddressed. An absence of psychological safety can lead to a lack of trust, resulting in less knowledge sharing, siloes, and reduced efficiency.

Research indicates that when groups can speak without fear of backlash at work, they are more likely to engage in difficult conversations, innovate in their roles, and contribute more meaningfully to their collective goals. Psychological safety not only facilitates the exchange of ideas but also enhances creative problem-solving and enables organisations to navigate challenges. It encourages open discussions and the exploration of new approaches without the fear of negative outcomes. This can foster mutual learning, effective collaboration, and high-quality work.

## **Psychological safety in women-led organisations**

In my experience working with WLOs located in the Global South, I have witnessed the pivotal role WLOs play in addressing emergencies in humanitarian settings. Working amidst conflict environments, WLOs are deeply rooted in the communities we serve, engaging as first responders, providing essential supplies and life-preserving services, and enhancing awareness and risk communication. While our organisations may vary in size, form and geographical location, and operate at different levels with diverse strengths, we collectively embody the core principles of humanitarianism.

Despite being essential to the humanitarian sector and bringing unique insights, WLOs often experience low psychological safety when faced with scepticism from agencies about our capabilities, which can hinder open communication. For instance, in South Sudan, WLOs working on gender-based violence (GBV) prevention in protection-of-civilian sites have repeatedly proposed community-led initiatives for GBV prevention that were initially dismissed by a leading international agency as too ‘unstructured’ and ‘informal’. In this case, the leaders of the WLO felt that their insights, rooted in cultural understanding, expertise and a community-based approach, were not taken seriously. To better cultivate psychological safety, one of the first steps is for agencies to address the implicit biases within their staff and fully recognise that WLOs possess not only a deep understanding of the needs of affected populations, but also have the capacity to participate in the designing phase of initiatives, provide culturally appropriate responses, and implement innovative approaches.

It is also essential to rethink how partnerships are currently structured. Donor funds are typically received by WLOs through international organisations, limiting direct funding access for local organisations with the capacity to design and manage humanitarian responses. Too often, WLO participation in internationally funded humanitarian programming is limited to pre-designed projects, with agencies favouring sub-granting approaches that distribute minor amounts to local entities, rather than fostering long-term relationships aimed at enhancing organisational strength, leadership and autonomy.

## Improved partnerships

To better address the needs of the communities we serve, there is a pressing need to foster improved partnerships in the humanitarian system. There are power dynamics embedded in these interactions, where the international organisation has overwhelmingly more resources and influence. There have been multiple efforts to balance them out; however, the financial dependency in the system and the limited spaces for WLOs to be part of the decision-making process are significant limitations to advancing in this regard. In many cases, to be taken into account within the humanitarian ecosystem, it has become an unspoken agreement to conform to the agendas dictated by donors rather than advocate for approaches that we consider to be more effective based on our local experience and knowledge. There is an ongoing fear of losing resources, and this prevents WLOs from discussing anything that might contradict funder priorities.

For example, a Syrian WLO mobilising resources to implement its mental health programme for conflict-affected women and girls received ‘suggestions’ from its main funder to focus instead on more quantifiable health outcomes such as vaccination rates, which was a main concern for the donor organisation. As there was low psychological safety in this partnership, the WLO was hesitant to express strong disagreement, which could potentially risk their present and future funding. This led to deprioritising a service that was repeatedly requested by survivors in the community. You can reread this paragraph and find similar examples in any country with humanitarian responses around the world. I can assure you that the WLOs in the country you have in mind are facing exactly the same challenges regarding partnerships.

To leverage the potential of such partnerships, it is crucial to start prioritising the cultivation of psychological safety within the humanitarian sector. When there is a high psychologically safe environment, there is an honest feedback loop with WLOs that can enable donors to make more informed funding decisions. Likewise, open dialogue can promote greater accountability regarding resource allocation. They can support more innovative and potentially high-impact initiatives without a fear of failure as open communication can facilitate learning and adaptation. Working closely with WLOs in this type of space can ensure solutions that are more contextually relevant and have the potential to address the root cause of issues rather than the symptoms. Building trust, promoting learning, and encouraging open communication are key in this process.

## Building trust

Recent studies have suggested that trust and cooperation are predictors of team learning, where trust positively influences team effort and monitoring, ultimately leading to team effectiveness. In short, as trust increases, inefficiency decreases. It is our starting point; part of that trust lies not only in WLOs as humanitarians but also in our knowledge. We have experience with local communities and expertise in diverse areas, which need to be taken into account, especially with early engagement at the planning stage of a project.

There is a need to recognise the difference between participation and consultation. The former seeks sustained inclusion from the planning stage and involves sharing input and priorities regarding the conceptualisation and design of policy and programming, implementation, monitoring, and the evaluation process. Participation entails a deeper, ongoing involvement where WLOs are seen as equal partners, actively contributing to every phase of a project or process. This approach fosters psychological safety by creating an environment where local voices are respected, integrated into decision-making processes, and most importantly, heard.

On the other hand, consultation often involves seeking input at specific stages of a project or process without guaranteeing that this input will influence the final decisions. It can be more superficial, where WLOs are asked for their opinions but do not have a continuous role in shaping the project's direction. This limited engagement can hinder the development of trust and psychological safety, as the leaders of these organisations may feel their contributions are undervalued.

For example, WLOs in Jordan report they are rarely involved in the planning stage of projects, and the input they could provide is limited to enabling access to communities or providing background information on the local context. This reflects a consultative approach, which does not fully leverage the insights of local organisations. It emphasises the need to broaden the possibility of partnerships and widen communication channels, recognising WLOs as knowledge experts. Through psychological safety, there is an opportunity to foster more meaningful participation, specifically including women's voices by engaging them at the earliest stage. By transitioning from consultation to true participation, humanitarian agencies can build trust, ultimately leading to more inclusive projects or processes.

## **Promoting learning**

Psychological safety is associated with learning at individual, group and organisational levels. Extensive research suggests that psychological safety can enable team learning and effectiveness, while psychologically safe environments can foster creativity. WLOs adopt innovative approaches in their work with communities, resulting in many creative solutions within our interventions. Our strong connections with the local community provide us with insights that may be challenging for organisations outside our context to grasp, offering valuable learning experiences for international donors. However, these strengths are often overlooked, requiring the implementation of strategies to facilitate more meaningful interactions and ensure the inclusion of local expertise in programming efforts.

Psychological safety can cultivate environments conducive to trying innovative approaches and fostering a culture where mistakes are viewed as growth opportunities. Additionally, it can promote open and transparent communication, leading to enhanced collaboration. Studies have demonstrated that psychological safety is particularly important for learning behaviours such as knowledge sharing, speaking openly, fostering creative and innovative outcomes, and cultivating a supportive diversity and inclusion climate.

## Encouraging open communication

People are more likely to speak up in organisational contexts when they experience greater psychological safety, and their voices can help identify opportunities and challenges, as well as provide ideas for improvement. Community-based organisations, such as WLOs, have the capability to drive significant social change by not only delivering services but also mobilising communities, advocating for policy reforms, and challenging societal norms that enable harmful practices. Within psychologically safe spaces, it is imperative to include the voices of women at the centre of policymaking.

There is a practical need for broader and more diverse involvement of WLOs in participatory processes, even though focusing on the most readily available groups may seem faster, simpler, and less resource-intensive. The lack of representation can significantly limit the variety of insights, knowledge and experiences that can contribute to the process. Humanitarian actors have recognised that the absence of women in policy processes is problematic and can result in policies that fail to integrate the needs of women. If WLOs had the opportunity to be at the centre of policymaking, this could begin to redefine power dynamics and potentially help equalise the power-imbalanced relationships that exist.

## Next steps

Organisations and each and every person within the humanitarian system have a shared role in creating more psychologically safe spaces. All can work together in joint planning sessions, promote more honest dialogues, and engage in collaborative problem-solving to build a stronger foundation of trust and mutual respect. This culture of respect can be encouraged by agencies when they acknowledge the deep expertise WLOs have regarding local realities and behave in ways that demonstrate that they value WLOs' contributions. When flexible funding is provided, it allows WLOs to adapt their actions to evolving community needs. This flexibility is a way to demonstrate trust in the expertise and judgement that women-led organisations have to make appropriate resource allocations. It is important to create safe spaces for WLOs to express ideas or concerns without the fear of negative consequences. In that sense, it is essential to encourage honest feedback and have a process in place to address it. WLOs can also cultivate psychological safety within their own teams, which can be achieved when funding can be invested in their organisation's resilience and staff.

Agencies can actively work to mitigate power imbalances by involving the voices of WLOs in strategic discussions and decision-making spaces that they would otherwise have limited access to. Moreover, people working in international organisations should embrace a mindset of continuous learning and invest in capacity-sharing programmes for their own staff on topics such as cultural sensitivity competencies, effective intercultural communication, and community-based approaches, among others.

## Conclusion

Psychological safety can empower WLOs to voice their ideas confidently and to propose innovative solutions without the fear of repercussions, which can potentially lead to more contextually appropriate

and effective interventions at a local level. Similarly, feeling safe to speak up allows WLOs to advocate more effectively for the needs of the communities they serve, influencing practice and policy in meaningful ways.

Therefore, fostering better partnerships between agencies in the humanitarian sector and WLOs is not just a matter of equality, but necessary for effective humanitarian action. As frontline responders deeply embedded in the communities we serve, WLOs offer invaluable insights and innovative solutions that are often overlooked. However, to unlock the full potential of these partnerships, cultivating psychological safety is paramount. Psychological safety not only builds trust and promotes learning but also empowers individuals to speak up, driving meaningful change at every level. By prioritising psychological safety, we can transcend traditional power dynamics, amplify diverse voices, and co-create solutions that truly address the complex needs of the affected communities in our countries. It is time to recognise the expertise and agency of WLOs, inviting us to the forefront of humanitarian decision-making.

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