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Enhancing Women's Participation and Leadership in Humanitarian Action

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A multifaceted and rights-based approach is essential to tackle internal organizational barriers and external socio-political challenges

Executive Summary

The world urgently needs more adaptable and accessible funding models that recognize the unique contributions of women's rights organizations and women-led organizations (WROs/WLOs). Despite their crucial role in crisis response, women's and girls' potential as leaders in humanitarian action (HA) is often sidelined, perpetuating gender inequalities and undermining response effectiveness. A multifaceted and rights-based approach is essential to tackle internal organizational barriers and external socio-political challenges.

Humanitarian response has historically been a largely male-dominated field. The focus on delivering lifesaving aid, particularly in the early stages of a response, has often resulted in gender equality being deprioritized or seen as a 'check the box' activity. Our research from the She Leads in Crisis (SLIC) project¹ found that institutional donors (including countries that have a feminist foreign or development policy) have not taken sufficient action to meet their international human rights obligations and humanitarian policy commitments regarding women and girls and the organizations that represent them in fragile and conflict-affected countries. The research also revealed information gaps (e.g., lack of data transparency on funding that hinders accountability) and a lack of consensus on the need for targets to boost investment in women's participation and leadership in humanitarian action.

Although there is widespread support for the rhetoric around women's leadership, there is still no consensus around how to achieve it. A crucial next step will be to determine what additional evidence is needed to shift the current paradigm while continuing to conduct gender equality and empowerment of women and girls (GEEWG) advocacy; promoting equitable partnerships and greater risk sharing between WLOs and international agencies; harmonizing and simplifying donors' and intermediaries' funding mechanisms, requirements and processes; and incentivizing women's meaningful participation at all levels in the humanitarian architecture including the cluster

system and UN Humanitarian Country Teams.

The findings in this policy brief are drawn from CARE's She Leads in Crisis (SLIC) project, sponsored by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. It sets out to provide key findings from the research and profile CARE's recommendations to guide advocacy efforts to increase both the volume and quality of funding to WRO/WLOs; advance gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in humanitarian action; and ensure women have full, equal, meaningful and safe participation at all levels of humanitarian decision-making. The research underscores the need for a strategic shift in funding practices and programming to ensure gender-responsive and gender-transformative approaches are the goal, greater support for locally-led humanitarian action and increased accountability to affected populations, and increased investment in gender-responsive risk and forecast-based financing (including Disaster Risk Reduction and Anticipatory Action programming), going beyond resilience to deliver durable solutions in fragile and crisis-affected communities.



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¹ Whipkey, K. and Cajegas, L. (2023) Explaining Implementation Gaps in International Commitments to Women's Participation and Leadership in Humanitarian Action: A review of the literature. Draft report for CARE International.

Introduction

The commitment to enhance women’s participation and leadership (WPL) has been increasingly recognized as pivotal for achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls in crisis situations. Despite this acknowledgment at the international level, a significant gap persists between international legal and policy commitments on the one hand and their implementation on the ground on the other.

Integrating a gender focus into humanitarian operations is not enough to move toward full, equal, meaningful, and safe WPL in humanitarian action. Further, doing so without critically examining the inclusion of women and girls can reinforce unequal gender norms and forms of oppression, particularly for the most marginalized women and girls in a given context. Instead, donors and humanitarian organizations must also assess how women and girls are being included or excluded, and how intersecting forms of discrimination exacerbate underlying gender inequality. The decreased programmatic focus and lack of core funding to WLO only perpetuates and exacerbates the constraints they face in these contexts.

The current trend in donor funding, characterized by the alarmingly low allocation of Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Women-Led Organizations and Women’s Rights Organizations (WLO/WROs) in humanitarian contexts, presents a critical challenge to the empowerment of the women and girls they seek to represent.

Despite international commitments to localization and the recognized need for increasing support to local non-governmental organizations, including WLO/WROs, the stark reality is that such commitments have yet to translate into proportional financial support. With funding for WLO/WROs accounting for as little as 1% of total ODA in 2021 and signs pointing towards a potential decrease in subsequent years, the gap between legal obligation, policy and practice remains wide.

The minimal distribution of Country Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs) to WLO/WROs is just one example of why there is an urgent need for a strategic overhaul of humanitarian



Empowering women workers in Bangladesh

financing. The absence of a comprehensive system that allows multilateral agencies to track the allocation and impact of their funding for WPL further exacerbates the situation (‘we don’t know what we don’t measure’). And although the Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) is expected to endorse a definition of WLOs in the first half of 2024, it will subsequently need to agree to adjust its Financial Tracking System so it can identify WLOs and what funding is allocated to them.

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Key Findings

1. Barriers to Women's Participation and Leadership

- **Inadequate and inconsistent funding for initiatives aimed at increasing women's participation and leadership:** ODA funding for gender equality in humanitarian action has increased in recent years from a low base. However, in 2021, it only reached 1.9% of humanitarian aid and was almost entirely for gender mainstreaming rather than standalone gender programming.² ODA databases (OECD-DAC, OCHA, IATI) do not specifically track funding for WPL or WLOs/WROs. The data on funding for gender equality is inconsistent and only partially captures funding flows, gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health, initiatives. Despite being the largest recipients of ODA, multilateral agencies and donors do not have a coherent system to track who they fund and whether their funding and programs contribute to gender equality or WPL.
- **Gender equality and localization policies and frameworks lack the incentives or accountability to be transformative:** UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and related Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) resolutions include a focus on

women's participation, setting a framework for addressing gender in humanitarian action that should be fully operationalized by the UN Security Council and the international donor community. However, many policy frameworks in this area fall short in adequately promoting GEEWG, often relying on a gender mainstreaming approach. This approach is widely adopted by OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donor agencies. Despite long-standing recommendations to move beyond gender mainstreaming to enhance gender equality and women's participation and leadership (WPL), few donors have implemented specific gender or WPL programs in humanitarian efforts, with such initiatives typically receiving minimal funding or remaining in trial phases. Even among donors adopting or aspiring to a feminist foreign policy, integrating GEEWG strategies into humanitarian policies and funding effectively remains a challenge. Nevertheless, commitments to GEEWG have led to increased institutional emphasis on gender considerations and the empowerment of women and girls, thereby elevating the importance of the WPL agenda.³

- **Organizational structures, leadership, and decision-making processes.** The absence of WROs/WLOs in leadership and decision-making related



Vanuatu Gender Justice

² The She Leads in Crisis (SLIC) Report Card - <https://www.care.org/reports-and-resources/she-leads-in-crisis-report-card/>
³ Ibid., 1.

to Country Based Pooled Funds (CBPF) allocations and the historical lack of women inclusion on CBPF Advisory Boards (which set the strategic vision of each country fund and decide how funds are distributed) remain barriers for inclusion of WLOs/WROs in humanitarian decision making. UN OCHA has started to include WRO/WLOs on advisory boards for some CBPFs, but they still only represent about 7% of the total as of 2021.⁴ The presence of WLOs/WROs on these boards can help to make more visible the challenges that local WRO/WLOs face such as being siloed, sidelined, and silenced in male-dominated decision-making spaces. It also opens up more access to funding information for networks of WLOs/WROs. Unfortunately, though, the low percentage of WRO/WLO representation still means that their perspectives are less likely to be influential in the near term.

2. Opportunities for Enhancement

- **Strengthening oversight and accountability by setting clear targets for WPL, monitoring progress, enabling diverse representation, and holding actors accountable:** Even though local NGOs participate in 80% of national-level humanitarian coordination teams (HCTs), leadership seats are predominantly occupied by international actors, such as the UN (42%), leaving only 8% for local/national NGOs.⁵ This distribution severely limits the opportunities for local WROs/WLOs, who face additional gendered barriers to other LNGOs, to access leadership and decision-making roles, a situation further exacerbated by the majority of OECD funding flowing to UN/multilaterals. Advisory boards for Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs) include only about 7% of WRO/WLO leadership, indicating that their perspectives are less likely to impact funding decisions and coordination in HA.



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⁴ International Rescue Committee. 2023. "Why Wait? How the Humanitarian System Can Better Fund Women-Led and Women's Rights Organizations." International Rescue Committee. <https://www.rescue.org/resource/why-wait-how-humanitarian-system-can-better-fund-women-led-and-womens-rights-organizations>.

⁵ 2023. "A More Localized Aid System: Current Status Discourse." ALNAP. <https://www.alnap.org/a-more-localised-aid-system-current-status-discourse-summary>.

CASE STUDY 1

The Philippines has made notable strides in integrating the WPS agenda through its National Action Plans (NAPs), with the first one launched in 2010. The Philippines' approach to WPS emphasizes the importance of local women's organizations in peace processes and humanitarian action. By setting clear targets for women's participation and leadership (WPL) and establishing mechanisms for monitoring progress, the Philippines has enhanced the representation and influence of women, particularly from local communities, in peace-building and decision-making processes. This approach has led to more inclusive peace negotiations and efforts to address the needs of women and girls in conflict-affected areas, highlighting the impact of strong oversight and accountability mechanisms on humanitarian outcomes.⁶

- **Empowering WRO/WLOs through direct funding, institutional development and applying equal partnership modalities:** Although there has been a growing recognition of the importance of locally led humanitarian action to reduce communities' dependence on humanitarian assistance and build their resilience, the actual funding directed to local and national responders, including WRO/WLOs, falls short of commitments.⁷ The High-Level Roundtable on Women & Girls at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 suggested a 4% target for funding for WLOs. However, this was not agreed, and the Grand Bargain agreement only contained the 25% target for Local and National Actors.⁸ Research suggests that funding for WRO/WLOs in fragile states constitutes approximately 1% of Official Development Assistance (ODA), a percentage that has remained largely unchanged in the last decade.⁹

When funds do reach these organizations, they tend to be for small amounts, tied to specific programs, short-term in nature, and often place unfair levels of risk on the recipient organizations. This low-quality funding rarely supports core organizational activities, systems strengthening activities and investments (including staff remuneration and development) or the long-term viability of organizations. In addition, it often comes with burdensome and laborious reporting requirements that divert scarce resources away from serving people in need. The lack of dedicated and quality funding hampers the sustainability and operational

capacity of WROs/WLOs, limiting their ability to effectively participate and lead in humanitarian action.

Women-led organizations (WLOs) have played a crucial role in responding to the Syrian refugee crisis, particularly in neighboring countries like Jordan and Lebanon. These organizations have demonstrated the importance of having strategies that prioritize gender-specific needs and the capacity to address them. By focusing on capacity building and ensuring adequate staffing with the necessary skills and knowledge, these WLOs have provided targeted support to women and girls, including protection services, psychosocial support, and livelihood programs. Their work underscores the importance of empowering local actors and integrating GEEWG as a core component of humanitarian response, leading to more effective and responsive interventions.¹⁰



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6 Philippine Commission on Women - <https://pcw.gov.ph/ph-celebrates-30-years-of-filipino-women-in-uniformed-service-launches-national-action-plan-on-women-peace-and-security-for-the-next-10-years/>
7 <https://glocalisation.ifrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Section-2.pdf>
8 https://agendaforhumanity.org/sites/default/files/resources/2017/jul/WOMEN_AND%20GIRLS-CATALYSING_ACTION_TO_ACHIEVE_GENDER_EQUALITY_0.pdf
9 OECD. 2018. "Development Co-Operation Report 2018: Joining Forces to Leave No One Behind." Paris: OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/dcr-2018-en>.
10 <https://glocalisation.ifrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Action-Aid-2019-The-Localization-of-Aid-in-Jordan-and-Lebanon-Barriers-and-Opportunities-for-Women-led-Organizations.pdf>

■ **Leveraging data and evidence through systematic gender disaggregated data collection and analysis of women’s participation and leadership to inform interventions and hold policy makers accountable:**

Over the past 10 years the humanitarian sector has made some progress regarding the collection of sex disaggregated data and using gender analysis to make sense of it, but we don’t necessarily use it and even when we do, outcomes are rarely documented. Similarly, there has been some improvement in the level of consultation of women and girls impacted by crises over the same period, but their input too often does not meaningfully inform decisions, programs, or policies. With humanitarian funding unable to meet the current needs, investment in disaggregated data analysis and use is critical to implement evidence-based and impartial programming that targets and addresses the needs of the most vulnerable. Without an investment in relevant data disaggregation and in tools like Rapid Gender Analysis, critical at-risk populations are too often made invisible, and their specific humanitarian

needs not addressed. To make the progress needed in collecting and using gender disaggregated data at all levels of the humanitarian response, robust accountability mechanisms must be prioritized and put in place.

CASE STUDY 2

Canada’s Feminist International Assistance Policy, launched in 2017, exemplifies how leveraging data and evidence can inform interventions that promote women’s participation and leadership. By prioritizing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls as the primary objective of its international assistance, Canada has increased funding and support for women’s rights organizations (WROs) and initiatives focusing on women, peace, and security. The policy’s emphasis on evidence-based decision-making has led to more targeted and effective support for gender equality programs, demonstrating the impact of systematically collecting and analyzing data on women’s participation and leadership in humanitarian contexts.



Women Leading in Emergencies

Recommendations

For International Humanitarian Aid Systems, Governments and Donors.

- **Increase the volume and quality of funding to WLOs/WROs in humanitarian action:** Set ambitious targets to increase the volume of funding reaching WLOs/WROs and affected communities as directly as possible. Increase the quality of funding by ensuring more multi-year, flexible and core funding that is not earmarked (or only softly earmarked) and covers all direct and indirect costs borne by the recipients. This will allow WLOs/WROs to invest in institution strengthening, staff retention and professional development, and improve their longer-term organizational viability.
- **Make funding processes more accessible to WLOs/WROs:** Harmonize and simplify donors' and intermediaries' funding mechanisms, requirements, and processes (including for reporting and due diligence). Adopt more equitable partnership modalities, such as equitable sharing of risk with partners.
- **Enhance the transparency of funding flows to WLOs/WROs and accountability to affected communities:** Require that funding allocations to WLOs/WROs and to WPL in humanitarian programming are tracked and publicly reported on so that their progress and impact can be monitored, analyzed, and improved. Enhance the collection and use of gender-disaggregated data and analysis to ensure that the humanitarian response is prioritized and reaches the most marginalized groups.
- **Promote an inclusive organizational culture across the humanitarian sector:** Foster an organizational culture that values diversity and gender equality, promotes anti-racism and a decent work environment free of harassment and violence, and contributes to the decolonization of the humanitarian sector and its funding practices.

Conclusion

International law and policy affirms the right of women to engage in and lead peace, security, and humanitarian action, highlighting their critical role in advancing the Humanitarian, Development, Peace Nexus. Although practical experience and learning in this area are still emerging, available evidence demonstrates that policies and actions designed to finance and bolster Women's Participation and Leadership (WPL) in humanitarian action are not only viable but also yield short and longer-term benefits to entire communities and beyond. The urgency to expand these efforts is intensifying, driven by escalating humanitarian needs, deepening global inequalities, a multiplicity of armed conflicts and the existential threat posed by the climate crisis.

The call for more and higher quality humanitarian funding models that capitalize on the unique impact of women's participation and leadership is growing. This includes providing core, flexible, unrestricted funding that allows WLOs/WROs organizations to strengthen their organizational capacity, innovate, and respond to emerging needs. Closing the gap between commitments and the reality of women's participation and leadership in humanitarian action requires committed and concerted efforts from all stakeholders. By addressing barriers and leveraging opportunities for WPL enhancement, we can foster a more inclusive, effective, and equitable humanitarian system. Let us commit to empowering women as leaders and decision-makers in humanitarian contexts, transforming commitments into concrete actions for global resilience.



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