

Still here

How Palestinian women-led organisations continue to support communities – and what must change

A joint advocacy briefing by CARE and nine Palestinian women-led organisations

> *"We are part of our people, and standing with them is central to our mission."*[1]

This briefing was developed jointly by CARE and nine partner women-led organisations (WLOs) working in Palestine. It examines these WLOs' operating environment since October 2023, focusing on the barriers and challenges they face in delivering services and assistance to communities across Gaza and the West Bank.[2] *It also highlights the specific approaches and strategies that WLOs have been using to keep operating and reaching civilians, including women and girls, despite an increasingly hostile environment. The briefing draws primarily on interviews with the nine WLOs; it is complemented by the findings from two CARE surveys about WLOs and women's rights organisations (WROs) in Palestine.*[3]

Key findings

WLOs in Gaza and the West Bank operate in different but connected contexts. Across Palestine, their ability to survive and reach communities is under severe pressure from Israel's occupation, ongoing hostilities, violence and expanding Israeli military control, although the nature and intensity of these pressures differ.

Insecurity, violence and movement restrictions are shaping whether and how WLOs can operate. In Gaza, attacks, shifting military zones, destroyed infrastructure and the absence of safe locations place staff, volunteers and communities at constant risk. In the West Bank, military operations, settler violence, arrests, road closures and more than 1,000 military gates and checkpoints restrict movement, disrupt services and isolate communities.

Funding is one of the most significant constraints on WLOs' ability to respond. Funding is predominantly short-term and project-based, often fails to cover core, security, safety and staff-support costs, and is accompanied by disproportionate administrative and compliance requirements. Donor priorities can also push WLOs away from their established areas of work towards short-term emergency activities.

---

[1] Quote from interview with the Psychosocial Counselling Center for Women.

[2] Of the nine WLOs, three are based in Gaza, four in the West Bank, and two operate across both. The Women's Affairs Technical Committee has staff in Gaza and the West Bank, while the Business Women Forum operates through staff in the West Bank and through consultants in Gaza. All are medium-sized organisations except the Women's Affairs Center, which is large.

[3] CARE Palestine (2026) WLOs/WROs Mapping in Palestine: Final Report (unpublished); CARE Canada and CARE Caucasus (2026) Dual Impact of Aid Cuts and Repressive Laws on WLOs and WROs in the Global South. CARE Palestine's WLO/WRO Mapping surveyed 125 WLOs/WROs across the West Bank, Jerusalem and Gaza between November and December 2025, through an online questionnaire and desk review, examining their focus areas, capacity, funding and influence within the humanitarian and development ecosystem. CARE's global research surveyed 70 WROs, WLOs and feminist organisations across eight countries between August and September 2025, including 11 Palestinian WLOs/WROs.

WLOs are keeping services running through significant adaptation, but these strategies cannot compensate for systemic constraints. Organisations have moved services into tents, shelters and community spaces, relied more heavily on volunteers and CBOs, used remote and digital approaches, and repurposed assets.

Staff and volunteers experience the consequences of the hostilities, movement restrictions and occupation twice: as civilians living through forced displacement, bereavement, insecurity, economic pressure and daily violence, and as frontline workers supporting people facing profound trauma and distress.

WLOs remain constrained by unequal relationships with donors and with intermediaries (INGOs, UN agencies) and in coordination structures. They are frequently treated as project implementers or sources of information rather than as equal partners with decision-making power.

> Palestinian WLOs are calling to be recognised and supported as equal partners, with sustained, flexible funding, shared responsibility for risks, and meaningful power over the decisions that shape their work and their communities' lives. The following summary recommendations set out what donors, intermediaries (UN agencies, INGOs) and humanitarian coordination bodies must do to put this into practice.
>
> **Fund WLOs as equal partners, not short-term implementers**
> Provide direct, more predictable, multi-year, flexible funding, including for all indirect costs, and support WLOs' established areas of work alongside emergency response.
>
> **Make procedures proportionate, contextualised and workable**
> Simplify donors' application, management, compliance and reporting requirements; preserve flexibility through funding chains and ensure intermediaries cascade flexibility to WLOs; address banking and transfer barriers; and adapt requirements to the realities in which WLOs are operating.
>
> **Shift from subcontracting to shared power, risk and responsibility**
> Involve WLOs from the outset in setting priorities, designing programmes and budgets, and determining how risks and responsibilities are shared, rather than treating them primarily as delivery partners.
>
> **Turn participation into influence**
> Ensure WLOs play critical roles in coordination, policy and funding decisions, including leadership and governance roles, and remove the financial, linguistic, technical and access barriers that limit their full, equal, meaningful and safe participation in and leadership of humanitarian coordination structures.

Background

"Now all the households are in need": How the war and occupation have changed the needs of civilians

This research was conducted against the backdrop of nearly three years of hostilities in Gaza, marked by extensive civilian harm, widespread destruction of homes and civilian infrastructure, repeated forced displacement and severe disruption of the basic services and systems people depend on to survive. Around 82% of all structures in the Gaza Strip have been damaged, two-thirds of them destroyed, generating over 60 million tonnes of debris,[4] while the population is now confined to roughly a third of the Strip and essential health, water and sanitation systems have been severely degraded. These developments have not simply increased the scale of need; they have changed its nature.

> *"Today, every family in the Gaza Strip needs medicine, education, water, everything. Before the war, there were some families [in need]. Today, after the war, every family in the Gaza Strip needs everything."* - Zakher Association

Before the war, WLOs provided more targeted support around livelihoods and economic empowerment, legal assistance and healthcare. Today, needs for essentials such as water, food and medicine are widespread rather than exceptional. The banking system barely functions, leaving people unable to withdraw their own money, even where cash is available. Restrictions on the entry of goods mean that basic items may be scarce or unaffordable.



Widespread destruction of homes and repeated forced displacement have also transformed living conditions. WLOs described families living in tents and makeshift displacement sites through extreme summer heat, surrounded by rodents,[5] in overcrowded conditions and with little privacy. Shelter conditions themselves have become a protection and health concern. Women and girls share toilets and washing facilities, and water scarcity can make basic hygiene impossible. Many women who wear headscarves described keeping them on day and night in shared tents, causing skin irritation, while adolescent girls were reported to go through entire menstrual cycles without being able to bathe.

[4] UN News (2026) Gaza: Destruction of buildings rises by nearly 10 per cent since ceasefire, 13 August 2026, citing UNOSAT and UNRWA.

[5] The interviews informing this section were conducted in summer 2026, when interviewees described extreme heat as a primary hardship in the tents; none referenced winter conditions specifically. However, the previous winter showed how much worse conditions become in cold and wet weather.

Families unable to afford sanitary pads have resorted to pieces of cloth, contributing to infection, shame, and isolation.

> *"Imagine that some girls are using cotton fabrics instead of diapers [pads]... When these girls say that throughout their menstrual cycle, they did not shower, not even once. All this affects their psychology; it affects their health... They hide themselves because they don't want anyone to smell them."* - Women's Affairs Center

The war has also created new and urgent protection and economic needs for women and girls. Nearly 1 in 4 households in Gaza are now headed by women – double the rate seen before October 2023.[6] Those women are left as sole providers in an economy offering almost no work or cash; they are also exposed to higher protection risks.[7]

Girls have also been severely affected by the economic consequences of the war. According to the Women's Affairs Center's own research, around 20% of early marriages involve girls as young as 14, with some families marrying daughters early under severe financial pressure. Because courts are closed or inaccessible, many marriages go unregistered. The organisation documented the case of a girl under 16 who was married and divorced within three days, with no legal record of the marriage and therefore no clear basis on which to claim alimony, dowry or custody in the event of pregnancy or separation. WLOs in Gaza also described new and unfamiliar perpetrators, including service providers and strangers seen in markets and displacement centres, emerging as a source of sexual abuse and exploitation against women and girls, distinct from the more familiar forms of violence they had previously documented.

In the West Bank, the needs of civilians have similarly increased and changed, although the drivers and operating environment differ. Extreme geographical fragmentation, settler violence, military operations and movement restrictions are increasingly cutting communities off from livelihoods, services and assistance. Transport costs have risen sharply, with one WLO reporting an increase of 150–250%. Needs are particularly acute among displaced families, refugee-camp communities, isolated rural populations, women-headed households and families affected by demolitions, settler violence and loss of livelihoods.

In Jenin and Tulkarem, families fleeing military operations were described as leaving with almost nothing. Girls arriving at new schools without uniforms or familiar belongings faced bullying and psychological distress, in some cases contributing to school dropouts.

> *"When the families left the camps, they went to host families... girls changed schools, their environment changed, they were under psychological pressure... They left their homes without taking clothes because the army forbade them to take anything. So, when they reached school without a uniform, they were abused [bullied]. All these simple things affect the mothers' psychology and the psychology of the children."* - Mothers School Society

[6] UN Women (2026) Left to carry households alone: War and the rise of women-headed households in Gaza.

[7] Ibid.

Women and girls face protection risks, compounded by geographical isolation and weakened services. The Psychosocial Counselling Center for Women described how women in Area C experience settler and military violence alongside poverty and gender-based violence (GBV), including early marriage and physical, economic and sexual violence. Women Media and Development described a case in Bethlehem in which an elderly woman was killed by her stepson, a psychiatric patient whose treatment had been interrupted because medication was unavailable and specialist public-sector staff were no longer working due to unpaid salaries. WLOs said cases that would previously have been managed through public systems are increasingly falling to local organisations.

Economic roles are also shifting, placing additional pressure on women. As men lose work or are unable to move freely, more women are taking responsibility for household income, including through home-based businesses. WLOs described economic empowerment not simply as a development intervention, but increasingly as part of protection and recovery.

> *"A man who stopped working in settlements or inside Israel, now they don't have an income, they don't have jobs, so the whole burden is shifted to women."* - Business Women Forum

Young women are also increasingly supporting their families through online work. While this creates income opportunities, WLOs reported that some face cyber-harassment, blackmail and exploitation, including employers withholding wages or threatening to share personal images.

Beyond immediate humanitarian and economic needs, WLOs operating in the West Bank also described growing pressure on women's public and political participation. Women Media and Development documented cases of female municipal candidates withdrawing after threats were made against them or their families. Women who retained their seats were, in some cases, excluded from decision-making. In one example, a female software engineer appointed to a municipal infrastructure sub-committee was denied access to project information or meaningful participation in decisions, effectively reducing her role, in the organisation's words, to "zero".

"*But we continue working*": The overlapping barriers and challenges faced by Palestinian WLOs

Multiple and overlapping operational, administrative, financial and societal barriers are shaping how WLOs operate. While the nature of some of these barriers may differ between Gaza and the West Bank, WLOs also face common challenges, in particular severe funding constraints and the gendered dimensions of their work.

Insecurity, violence and movement restrictions

In **Gaza**, WLOs consistently described bombing, constant risk of targeting, hazards due to heavily damaged roads and active military zoning, and the absence of safe locations, putting their staff – the majority of whom are women – volunteers, and the populations they serve at risk. WLOs also consistently reported on the lack of protection for civil society organisations, including WLOs.

> *"In the Gaza Strip, there are no secure areas. There is always bombing. There are always deaths. We've always been under threat."* - Zakher Association

Despite what many described as insurmountable security risks, WLOs are using different approaches to continue serving communities, including moving the location of activities and delivering interventions to a smaller number of participants.

> *"When there's a flyer saying that this is a red or orange zone, we leave them and we move towards green areas, and areas under bombing, we leave them. We try to find relatively secure areas or what's so-called secure areas despite the reality that we ask God to protect us."* - *Zakher* Association

> *"Despite security challenges, we must consider timing for any meeting, for any activities. We cannot go to evening activities because maybe they will attack. We cannot hold meetings with youth too early in the morning because they may be attacked. We don't have meetings with too many participants, no more than 20 persons, because we are risking their lives because at that time, the drones were moving inside Gaza."* - *Women*'s Affairs Technical Committee

In the **West Bank**, staff and volunteers operate under constant threat of physical violence, arrest, and intimidation. Military and settler violence and extreme mobility constraints emerge as the primary security risks, while the type of work heightens staff and volunteers' exposure to threats and harm**.**

> *"One of the colleagues who lives in the village was documenting human rights violations... There was no public transportation... He was beaten and humiliated by the settlers."* - *Women* Media and Development

> *"It is very dangerous to move from village to village because these military groups have the weapons and they really threaten the lives of the team."* - Psychosocial Counselling Center for Women

Over 1,000 military gates and checkpoints also severely restrict movement across the West Bank and fragment areas. One WLO reported that, due to the sealing of villages only a few minutes away from the Nablus city centre, for seven months, staff had to take dangerous, unpaved bypass mountain roads, turning a 10-minute commute into a hazardous 2–3-hour detour. The Business Women Forum explained that access constraints affect different stages of service delivery at the same time, limiting project participants' ability to reach training, staff's ability to reach offices and locations of operations, and the Forum's ability to connect women to markets, suppliers and other service providers.

> *"Nablus is a closed area. And it is surrounded by checkpoints. I have to take bypass routes that are very dangerous (...) even if I arrive, sometimes I can't go back home."* - *Mothers* School Society

Similarly to WLOs operating in Gaza, WLOs in the West Bank implement different strategies to maintain service delivery. This includes the use of digital tools and monitoring social media networks before setting out on a journey to check real-time updates on accessible routes; mixed field teams of women and men when documenting violations or visiting unfamiliar and volatile areas; the use of private taxis or securing dedicated vehicles so staff do not have to rely on risky public transport networks; delaying or postponing travel to avoid high-risk early morning or late evening hours when settler attacks are most frequent on the roads; coordinating meetings at neutral institutional spaces that are easily accessible to the different parties rather than travelling directly into volatile rural communities; shifting to online and hybrid delivery modalities whenever possible; using local facilitators; and referring cases to local community-based organisations (CBOs).

> **"***We hired more staff and also we have more volunteers who support our intervention in coordination with the women's CBOs in the villages and marginalised areas where we are implementing our interventions, especially these areas classified as Area C.*[8] *Women's CBOs also facilitate our interventions in these communities by referring the cases that are in need of our services."* - Psychosocial Counselling Center for Women
>
> *"Community-based organisations in the targeted locations, especially if they are remote or if they are far, become the last mile of delivery."* - Business Women Forum

One WLO also reported working with local protection committees to use mobile applications that allow field workers to record human rights violations and testimonies electronically and upload them directly to off-site servers. This reduces the need to carry physical documents through military checkpoints and helps protect both the information collected and the investigators.

Working on women's rights and protection further compounds security risks. For example, Women's Affairs Center described a female lawyer being threatened with death in court by the husband of a woman she represented in an alimony case. WLOs also face severe cyber-harassment, reputational smearing, and physical threats from ultra-conservative, local religious groups. The Psychosocial Counselling Center for Women was forced to close its Hebron office for a few days following threats from a local religious group, identified by the organisation as Hezb al-Tahrir, which used social media to accuse it of being against religion and culture.

> *"Being involved in courts and mediation, our staff sometimes feel intimidated because of the threats they receive from the government because we are targeted by the Israelis as workers with the government. Also, many of our attorneys are threatened by the husbands of women we support."* - Women's Affairs Center

[8] Area C covers more than 60% of the West Bank. Israel retains near-exclusive control over security, law enforcement, planning and construction in the area. Palestinian communities in Area C face significant restrictions on movement, construction and access to land and services, with major implications for livelihoods, infrastructure and humanitarian access.

Taking services directly to hard-to-reach communities

One of the clearest ways in which Palestinian WLOs have kept delivering services is by changing the locations and ways in which they work to be closer to displaced communities and relying on community organisations and volunteers with greater access and a stronger capacity to respond quickly, minimising the need for staff and project participants to cross checkpoints, navigate damaged roads or be exposed to attacks. To manage the loss of offices and other infrastructure, these organisations have redesigned traditional ways of working and reorganised their presence around where communities and displaced people are living.

In the northern **West Bank**, Not to Forget Women Society lost its main office during military incursions into Jenin Refugee Camp, while its second office was badly damaged. With its staff and board members themselves displaced, the organisation secured a temporary workspace in the Arab American University dormitories, which had become home to many families forced from the camp. Small amounts of flexible funding enabled it to replace essential equipment, rent the space and resume psychosocial support and counselling, this time from within the displaced community itself. The Psychosocial Counselling Center for Women uses a network of volunteers to reach newly displaced communities within 48 hours in coordination with UNICEF. It pairs this rapid response role with group supervision for staff and volunteers exposed to distressing casework. It can also move quickly because it has invested in local volunteers and staff support before an emergency occurs.



WLOs **in Gaza** have made similarly determined efforts to remain close to the communities and groups they serve, despite repeated displacement, destroyed premises, and extreme danger. After its Gaza City headquarters was demolished, the Women's Affairs Center established 31 educational points and 16 safe spaces in displacement areas including Deir al-Balah and Al-Mawasi, bringing services directly to women cut off by the collapse of transport and prohibitive travel costs. Staff work in tents in intense summer heat, rotating a single fan between partitions, sometimes only metres from the "Yellow Line"[9] and without any meaningful guarantee of safety. The Women's Affairs Center also supported 10 CBOs to extend protection and other services into local communities and shelters, reducing the need for movement and making greater use of CBOs' existing community presence.

[9] The "Yellow Line" refers to the Israeli military deployment line introduced following the October 2025 ceasefire, marking areas of Gaza where Israeli forces remained deployed and Palestinian access is heavily restricted. It originally encompassed around 53% of Gaza, but subsequent expansions of access-restricted areas have left around two-thirds of the Strip inaccessible or subject to severe access restrictions.

> The Society of Women Graduates also evacuated what it could salvage from its damaged office near Al-Shifa Hospital and transferred its vocational and professional training into tents: *"Education does not wait... The educational process is one of the most important steps that we must maintain, despite the destruction, despite the devastation... even among the tents, even among the rubble."*

Destroyed infrastructure and disruption of communications



Every Gaza-based organisation interviewed had lost, damaged or relocated premises or equipment. Women's Affairs Center and Zakher described destroyed offices; Society of Women Graduates found its premises damaged, and ten laptops stolen; and Women's Affairs Technical Committee stopped its Gaza operations for almost a year after its office was destroyed and staff lost family members. Society of Women Graduates' office sat near Al-Shifa Hospital; when the hospital came under attack, remaining staff hired a truck to evacuate what furniture and equipment they could. They reversed the move once conditions allowed a return. Many organisations now work from temporary offices, tents and dispersed service points. This means, for example, losing private and confidential rooms for GBV and legal services.

> *"Most of the organisations have been demolished. Their infrastructure, their buildings, their main offices were completely knocked down and demolished... most of them now function in temporary places like tents."* - Women's Affairs Center
>
> *"We lost our entire premises – everything was destroyed: the equipment, the tools, the buildings."* - Zakher Association

In the West Bank, damage is concentrated in specific locations rather than spread across the whole territory. Not to Forget Women Society's main office in Jenin refugee camp was destroyed with its furniture and equipment, and the organisation later rented space near displaced families. Women Media and Development described the demolition of greenhouses and other economic-empowerment assets by settlers or Israeli forces, while Psychosocial Counselling Center for Women staff are at times unable to enter offices in Nablus or Hebron during military operations, checkpoint closures or attacks by settlers.

> *"The organisation originally used to exist in the Jenin refugee camp... the first one, which is in the centre of the refugee camp, was totally destroyed with all of the equipment, furniture, everything."* - Not to Forget Women Society

These losses affect a local ecosystem already operating with uneven resources,[10] including due to repeated forced displacement, administrative constraints, funding cuts and communications challenges. Some WLOs in Gaza are forced to operate out of temporary tents or caravans under scorching summer heat, while electricity cuts and weak internet severely impede operations.

> CARE Palestine's WLOs/WROs mapping found that organisational capacity in Gaza is on average lower than in the West Bank, with 37.2% of Gaza-based WLOs/WROs operating at low capacity, against 28.0% across all of Palestine. It mapped almost no WLOs/WROs in North Gaza (1 of 43 Gaza-based WLOs/WROs), a gap it attributes directly to active conflict and mass forced displacement, not to the absence of women's organisations there.

Administrative and banking challenges

WLOs also must contend with multiple administrative constraints, including lack of physical cash, donor governance requirements (including those set by intermediaries), registration procedures imposed by the Palestinian authorities, as well as banks' own rules and restrictions.

In Gaza, WLOs are required to submit administrative and financial reports and register changes to their boards with the Ministry of Interior, based in Ramallah in the West Bank. Banks may then require confirmation of the newly constituted board and its authorised signatories before allowing the organisation to operate its accounts. These administrative processes have, however, also been delayed by the hostilities.

> *"We submitted our financial and administrative reports to the Ministry of the Interior more than a month and a half ago, and we are still waiting for the response of the Ministry in Ramallah. Our accounts remain closed until the members of the new board of directors are approved."* - Women's Affairs Center

At the same time, WLOs are expected to comply with donor-driven management and compliance requirements that are increasingly difficult, and may sometimes be impossible, to meet under conditions of repeated forced displacement. Zakher Association, for example, described being unable to hold the board elections required by some donors because board members were dispersed and could not safely gather.

Even where WLOs have secured funding and have access to their accounts, the destruction of Gaza's banking infrastructure and the shortage of available cash make everyday transactions, including payments to vendors and staff salaries, increasingly challenging, with very little that can be done to mitigate the impact on operations.

[10] CARE Palestine (2026) WLOs/WROs Mapping in Palestine: Final Report (unpublished).

> *"One of the major problems that we have is how to reach people with money. It may have taken us two months, and we couldn't reach people with money either because the banks were closed or because they couldn't withdraw the money."* - Women's Affairs Technical Committee

In the West Bank, WLOs also face several regulatory hurdles. The Palestine Monetary Authority (PMA) limitations and document processing constraints delay WLOs' basic operational tasks, while WLOs operating across Gaza and the West Bank are heavily restricted from processing financial transfers or salaries from their West Bank headquarters to teams in Gaza. Delivering money to staff and participants can take months and requires complex legal arrangements and procedures, such as setting up powers of attorney with individuals in Egypt to process transactions.

> *"We have increasing difficulties in issuing cheques or processing financial documents or opening new accounts and so on."* - Not to Forget Women Society

> *"The work from the West Bank to Gaza has become a big challenge. Organisations in the West Bank find it very difficult and challenging to make some transactions to Gaza."* - Women Media and Development

Funding constraints and donors' requirements

> *"If we did a comparison between the funding we receive as Women's Affairs Center and the requests that we receive, this is something really to be ashamed of. Because we cannot meet a big number, a humongous number of applications for women."* - Women's Affairs Center

All nine WLOs shared that funding-related constraints were among the most impactful barriers limiting their ability to deliver assistance and services to civilians, in particular women and girls, in contexts where their operations have been substantially hindered by insecurity, occupation and severe access restrictions, including restrictions on the movement of people and supplies in Gaza. The sudden 2025 funding cuts have further eroded their sustainability. Across Palestine, WLOs face several deeply rooted, structural funding barriers that undermine their financial security and operational independence.

Several organisations have been directly hit by funding cuts, withdrawn grants, or significant decreases in their budgets since October 2023,[11] with severe consequences for their staff and the communities they serve. Funding cuts and decreases are also taking place in the context of chronic underfunding and existing challenges that WLOs already face to access limited funding. In Gaza, after nearly three years of violence and relentless attacks combined with restrictions on the movement of supplies, rising operational costs and supply shortages have caused prices to skyrocket. WLOs described a gap between the nominal value of a grant on paper and what it can now

[11] CARE Canada (2026) Shrinking space, shrinking support: The impact of aid cuts and legal restrictions on women-led movements

buy. For example, Society of Women Graduates shared that its office rent increased by 300% while Women's Affairs Technical Committee said transport costs had risen tenfold.

> *"You have the main donor and then… another international NGO… a local big NGO… the final amount reaching the actual beneficiary or the target community is barely minimum."* - Not to Forget Women Society
>
> *"Several institutions withdrew funding and either moved or shifted to another organisation after October 2023."* - Zakher Association

The Women's Affairs Technical Committee experienced severe "defunding" and a sudden withdrawal of grants after the war began, forcing its staff size to drop from 20 down to eight because they could not pay salaries for over a year.

> *"Many funds were withdrawn from us either because we are working in Gaza or for political issues. They say they will not fund us as civil society organisations anymore. For one year and a half, we could not pay salaries for the staff. Many of them left because they found another job."* - Women's Affairs Technical Committee

The consequences are both organisational and operational: WLOs are losing vital resources, including staff, while facing increased competition for funding; at the same time, communities are directly affected as needs continue to grow and evolve.

WLOs described competition among local WLOs themselves for the same limited pool of funding, not just between local and international actors. In Gaza, the Women's Affairs Center described high competition among WLOs for the same funding calls as a constant source of stress, noting that organisations crowd into sectors – GBV funding especially – that are seen as easier to access, intensifying competition over increasingly small shares. The Business Women Forum described a related but distinct source of increased competition. As donor priorities shifted from economic empowerment and capacity building towards humanitarian response, actors previously focused on specialised mandates, economic regulation or policymaking, including civil society organisations, government bodies and quasi-governmental institutions, began moving into project implementation. This shift has intensified competition for an already limited and shrinking pool of funding, with local organisations specialising in women's economic empowerment now competing with a wider range of actors.

> *"Most WLOs also compete for GBV funding because it is easier to access, while many do not yet have basic GBV interventions in place. Health-focused organisations, for example, do not have enough awareness of how to integrate GBV into the health sector (…). We, as organisations, are competing for small shares."* - *Women*'s Affairs Center

While funding was cut or decreased, WLOs also experienced a rise in conditional funding whereby many major international donors started to require Palestinian NGOs to sign restrictive "anti-terrorism" or political vetting clauses. Several WLOs have consistently refused these conditions, locking them out of major funding streams.

WLOs rely heavily on short-term and project-based funding, with grants typically lasting from 3 to 12 months; this prevents longer-term strategic planning, fails to guarantee any continuity for employees, and leaves organisations in a state of constant, exhausting search for new proposals; it also makes it impossible to make a long-lasting impact in communities.

CARE Palestine's WLOs/WROs mapping identifies short-term, project-based funding as the single most damaging structural constraint across the sector, affecting WLOs/WROs at every capacity level. Only 23 of the 125 organisations mapped (18.4%) reported operating at high institutional capacity.

> *"Our organisation is a project system; there is no core fund. So, this is the problem and the difficult challenge that we always face. How to be sustainable for our employees. All the projects are temporary. So, the employees are worried about being let go."* - Society of Women Graduates
>
> *"Short-term and limited funding places additional pressure on our resources. Without stable funding, we must constantly search for new sources of income. This undermines organisational stability and makes it difficult to achieve the impact we want in the community. Projects lasting only three or four months, or even less than two years, are simply too short to do this."* - Not to Forget Women Society

Staffing and volunteer volatility

WLOs report multiple changes in staffing and volunteer numbers, both because of funding constraints and the escalation of violence, reflecting the evolving financial and operational environment, and the constant need to adapt.

Several WLOs lost significant numbers of paid staff after October 2023 due to the drastic 2025 funding cuts and only rebuilt later. The Women's Affairs Center cancelled 100 employees' contracts in 2023, then grew to 184 staff as new project funding arrived. The Women's Affairs Technical Committee fell from around 20 staff to a low of eight during 18 months of unpaid salaries in Gaza, before recovering to around 15 in the two months before the interview.

Women Media and Development described the same pattern: "*The number was reduced but then increased. Before the war, the number was bigger. It was reduced at the beginning of the war, but now it has increased."* In each case, however, growth followed a specific new short-term grant or project and did not indicate a general improvement in funding conditions.

Increased use of unpaid volunteers was also reported by several WLOs. In Gaza, the Society of Women Graduates' staff now numbers 30, plus 15 volunteers, though only 5 of the 30 are considered "permanent", since the organisation has no core, unrestricted funding at all; even the costs of its stable core team are technically carried on project budgets, and it is project coordinators, not the core team, who lose paid work when a project's funding lapses. Demand for volunteer opportunities greatly exceeds the organisation's capacity to mentor and supervise. Society of Women Graduates receives daily requests from women and girls aged 20 to 35 wanting to volunteer but can only offer two-month rotations.



Mothers School Society deliberately kept its paid staff numbers unchanged after October 2023, despite mounting financial strain, while its volunteer base grew sharply to meet rising demand for its services. In both cases, the growth in volunteers shows WLOs leaning more heavily on unpaid labour because they could not afford to convert that demand into paid positions, not a sign that funding had caught up with the growing need.

However, in some cases, WLOs saw an outright contraction rather than the growth described above. Zakher Association's permanent staff simply halved, from 10 to 5, and volunteers fell by more than half (from at least 25 to 10–15). This was not driven by a funding trade-off but by a devastating combination of factors: destroyed premises and equipment, severely restricted access to areas previously served that have become part of the "Yellow Zone", staff displacement and losses, and lack of funding.

Palestinian WLOs also face increasing pressure to change their areas of work and priorities in response to shifting donor trends. The nature of this pressure differs across contexts. In Gaza, funding has increasingly shifted away from longer-term development, economic justice and advocacy towards short-term emergency response and donor-preferred sectors such as GBV and basic relief. This can force WLOs to "follow the money", diluting their core specialisation and, in some cases, changing their identity, mission and strategic focus to survive.

In the West Bank, WLOs described a different but related problem: funding opportunities may remain focused on longer-term or thematic priorities but can be poorly aligned with immediate operational realities. WLOs cited funding calls centred on issues such as "ecological justice", "climate justice" or "peacebuilding" at a time when communities are dealing with road blockades, land confiscation, movement restrictions and immediate livelihood and protection concerns.

Across both contexts, the underlying issue is the same: donor priorities do not always reflect either WLOs' established areas of expertise or the most pressing needs of the communities they serve.

> *"If the donor is providing funding for mental health, you will find an organisation that works in whatever, shifting their identity, like changing their DNA to respond to the requirements of the donor and to adjust when the available fund and they do work that's not in their core specialisation."* - Not to Forget Women Society

> *"Since 2023, the focus of international development has shifted into more, by nature, more humanitarian [work]. You don't see more shedding light on the importance of women's economic justice for women."* - Business Women Forum

Reconciling the need for emergency relief and WLOs' primary mandate and areas of work

The experience of the Women's Affairs Technical Committee illustrates the tension WLOs can face between responding to immediate humanitarian needs and maintaining the longer-term feminist, women's rights and development work at the core of their mandate.

After its Gaza office was destroyed and staff were repeatedly displaced, the Women's Affairs Technical Committee resumed some of its work from Deir al-Balah and shifted part of its response towards direct assistance. The organisation supported groups of women to use traditional clay ovens, providing flour and bringing in people with the expertise to build the ovens. Women could then use them to bake bread for others or to sell. It contrasted this type of direct support with its usual economic empowerment work, which places greater emphasis on policy, lobbying, and influencing decision-making.

"It's true that we want to provide humanitarian aid. But we also don't want to lose our wider agenda, because even in these difficult circumstances, we still need to express our political and national identity."

For the Women's Affairs Technical Committee, the shift was therefore not simply a question of moving from development work to emergency relief. The organisation acknowledged the need to respond to immediate humanitarian needs, particularly as the crisis continued, while also seeking to reorganise its work and protect its broader mandate. It explained that some donors wanted projects framed specifically around humanitarian or emergency response, in some cases even requiring this framing in the project title. The organisation pushed back against this approach, stressing that providing humanitarian assistance should not require it to set aside its political, national, and rights-based agenda.

Funding nevertheless affected how far the Women's Affairs Technical Committee could sustain and develop some of these initiatives. The organisation explained that available funding did not consistently support longer-term work and that this had constrained its ability to continue planned activities. At the same time, it emphasised the value of investments such as the clay ovens, which remained available for women and communities to use beyond the immediate activity. More broadly, it called for core funding that would allow feminist organisations to maintain their staff, organisational capacity and decades of accumulated work alongside emergency programming.

In the West Bank, some WLOs also reported that intermediaries – both UN agencies and INGOs – retain significant control over where funding goes and what donors choose to fund. Mothers School Society said resources are concentrated among larger organisations headquartered in Ramallah, while branches and CBOs in the north receive less attention.

Compliance and due diligence requirements from international donors were described as disproportionate. Several WLOs highlighted the burden of donor vetting and due-diligence processes, which they said often remain the same regardless of grant size, placing the greatest strain on smaller CBOs with the least capacity to absorb them. Even for relatively small, short-term grants, organisations may still be required to complete full vendor registration, submit extensive documentation and, in some cases, screen every partner or project participant they intend to pay. The administrative burden can therefore be out of proportion to the funding received, consuming staff time already stretched across service delivery, reporting and fundraising. WLOs also noted that donor compliance systems do not reflect or adapt to an organisation's size, capacity or operating environment.

> *"…the requirements of applying for funding… so many policies, so many documents that you have to provide… It's very exhausting to the organisation that has already limited resources."* - Not to Forget Women Society
>
> *"Their funding procedure for 10,000 dollars is the same as for a million-dollar grant."* - Women's Affairs Center

Repurposing assets, protecting autonomy

Several WLOs have repurposed physical assets, institutional relationships and ways of working to sustain operations despite funding constraints, destroyed premises, and repeated displacement. In some cases, these approaches have generated independent income and strengthened organisational autonomy; in others, they have enabled WLOs to keep delivering services when conventional operating models were no longer possible.

Facing a 300% increase in post-war rent, alongside the theft of ten newly purchased laptops from its damaged office, the Society of Women Graduates now includes rent and staff costs in every short-term project proposal, spreading these fixed costs across active grants rather than relying on a single donor to cover them. This reduces its dependence on any funding cycle and helps protect its financial stability. Where the organisation lacks even a dedicated room, it takes services directly to displacement sites, running professional-development classes for graduates on floor mats and sofas placed on the ground in the summer heat rather than allowing its work to stop.

After its headquarters, equipment and files were destroyed, Zakher Association turned to the Palestinian NGO Network to keep its administrative and financial functions running from borrowed premises. At the same time, it shifted from office-based service delivery to a mobile field model, with staff providing psychosocial and legal counselling directly in displacement-camp tents.

Mothers School Society in Nablus has taken a different approach, using its physical assets to generate income outside donor funding cycles. It rents the basement of its building as commercial storage space and purpose-built halls for conferences and events. It also took out a commercial bank loan to add two further 200-square-metre floors specifically to expand this rental income, giving the organisation greater autonomy and flexibility and allowing some activities to continue when project funding ends. Using a UNDP restoration grant, it is also converting a historic building in the Nablus area into a "House of Women" centred around a cooperative kitchen and restaurant intended to generate its own income. Its Aqrabaniya building, established in 2003, was also repurposed as an emergency clinic and rescue point following the escalation, serving residents cut off by military closures.

After its premises in Jenin refugee camp were destroyed, Not to Forget Women Society rented space in the dormitories of the Arab American University in Jenin, where many displaced camp residents had relocated. This allowed the organisation to re-establish itself within the displaced community and continue providing services close to the communities it serves.

Implementers, not equal partners

Across Palestine, WLOs described a recurring pattern in which UN agencies and INGOs treat them as sub-contractors or implementers rather than genuine equal partners.[12] Instead of being involved from the outset in identifying priorities and designing programmes, WLOs are often brought in only to deliver activities that have already been defined elsewhere or to provide information that informs decisions made without them. Several WLOs also described international actors establishing their own presence in Palestine and delivering services directly in Gaza and the West Bank, bypassing local organisations altogether. They felt this undermined the role and long-term sustainability of organisations that are rooted in, and understand, the communities they serve. The recruitment of local staff by international organisations was also raised as an important challenge when staff have no choice but to leave due to the financial precarity of their existing employer.

> *"For a year or a year and a half, [the Women's Affairs Technical Committee] was not able* to pay salaries for *the staff. Many of them left because they found another job... Part of our permanent staff didn't receive salaries for more than one year. So they resigned and left for other jobs... Especially if they have loans, if they have other financial commitments to their families. So, they have to find new jobs. This is part of why we lost part of our staff. Also, after the war started, other international organisations appeared and started implementing directly. This way, they started competing with local NGOs and taking staff from WLOs."* - Women's Affairs Technical Committee

This imbalance is also reflected in funding structures. Some WLOs described multi-level funding chains in which resources pass from donors through UN agencies and INGOs before reaching local organisations, with each intermediary retaining a share. As a result, WLOs closest to affected communities receive smaller shares of funding and have less decision-making power. A similar dynamic is evident in coordination spaces, where local actors may be present in meetings and

[12] Ibid.

clusters but still have limited influence over strategic priorities, funding decisions or how the information they provide is ultimately used.

> *"A lot of international organisations treat the local NGOs or the local women-led organisations, CBOs and so on, as an implementer, not as an equal, not as a partner... not as a partner from the very beginning, co-leading, co-creating and co-everything."* - Not to Forget Women Society
>
> *"The international organisations who have opened branches in Gaza and started implementing their activities directly with the people... we see them as weakening the role of local organisations."* - Women's Affairs Center

In the West Bank specifically, some WLOs described additional funding constraints characterised by the concentration of resources among a small number of large, highly resourced Palestinian organisations headquartered in Ramallah. In contrast, frontline WLOs operating in the northern West Bank (such as Nablus and Jenin) receive very little direct funding, despite bearing the brunt of risks.

These challenges have become more acute as public institutions have lost capacity, and needs have continued to grow. With government salaries unpaid and public services under severe strain, WLOs are increasingly receiving cases that would previously have been handled by the Ministry of Social Development and other public bodies. At the same time, communities are relying more heavily on their support. One WLO explained that a basic course for 20 women can attract thousands of applications, forcing the organisation to turn away many women in need. The Psychosocial Counselling Center for Women has also partnered with local universities to help manage growing mental health and legal caseloads.

> *"We make agreements with universities. We accept students to do training in our organisation who are from the social work and psychology department or legal departments and we train them; we provide them with the advanced skills that they can support our teams in the field." - Psychosocial Counselling Center for Women*

WLOs' participation and influence in coordination structures

WLOs described a consistent gap between being present in humanitarian coordination structures and meaningfully participating in, leading or shaping what those structures decide. WLOs report participating in coordination mechanisms such as thematic clusters and working groups; in some cases, this has translated into a leadership role. For example, the Psychosocial Counselling Center for Women is the official rapid response focal point for displacement in the West Bank, working jointly with UNICEF. However, overall participation in structures is often limited to consultation and information sharing – with little feedback on how that information is used and limited demonstrated influence over needs-based targeting. Overlapping barriers, such as lack of Arabic translation, transport and movement restrictions, security, and internet and electricity issues, further hinder consistent participation.

> *"There is a difference between an organisation being present in coordination spaces and having a meaningful influence on the decisions being made... We are present across the relevant clusters, but the key question is: how are the needs of the targeted groups reflected and addressed through these mechanisms?"* - Mothers School Society

> *"WLOs can participate in some humanitarian coordination mechanisms, particularly through relevant clusters, working groups, NGO networks and thematic coordination spaces. However, meaningful participation and influence remain more challenging than simply having a seat or being invited to meetings... there is a tendency to rely on larger international agencies as primary interlocutors, which can marginalise the voices of local and WLOs."* - Society of Women Graduates

One example of good practice stood out: a cluster led by the Palestinian Working Woman Society, supported by UN Women, that rotates the hosting role among member organisations rather than concentrating it permanently with the best-resourced actor. One WLO, however, noted that even this model still favours organisations with staff time to spare. Women's Affairs Technical Committee described how it is deeply embedded in Palestinian civil society coordination, as a member of several associations and networks that function as peer coordination and collective advocacy spaces. It sees these as an alternative to the UN-coordinated architecture, better suited to its needs and allowing it to take an active role.

> *"Women-led organisations... play an essential role in humanitarian coordination mechanisms. Through our direct engagement with women and local communities, we can bring women's needs, priorities and lived experiences to the table, particularly issues that might otherwise remain invisible or receive insufficient attention... ensuring that gender equality and women's protection are treated as cross-cutting concerns rather than as separate or secondary issues."* - Women's Affairs Technical Committee

CARE Palestine's mapping of WLOs/WROs reinforces these findings. Only 19 of the 125 organisations mapped (15.2%) report high levels of collaboration with coordination structures, and high collaboration and high influence "strongly overlap". This suggests that influence is concentrated among a small group of well-connected women's organisations, while membership alone does not necessarily ensure a meaningful voice. The mapping also finds that existing coordination platforms are "predominantly accessible to formally registered and urban-based organisations", concentrated in Ramallah and Gaza City. This leaves WLOs/WROs outside these hubs, including in rural Hebron, Tubas, Jericho and North Gaza, with few accessible opportunities to participate in coordination. It also identifies nine WLOs/WROs that operate as networks, bringing together many other organisations. Their reach and influence could provide an entry point for widening participation, particularly for WLOs/WROs currently excluded from coordination structures.

"We listen to sad stories from women, which open our wounds": staff and volunteers carry suffering and hardship twice

Most WLOs interviewed raised the psychological toll on their own staff and volunteers, most before being asked directly. Staff and volunteers are living through forced displacement, loss, insecurity, or economic pressure while listening to accounts of violence and distress through their work, which has taken a toll on their mental health.

> *"They find themselves distracted because they have their personal and their professional commitments and provide a safe environment for the people that they support at the same time they are suffering as well. So this equation is really crazy."* - Not to Forget Women Society

In Gaza, staff return to work within days of catastrophic personal loss, despite multiple displacements and being surrounded by widespread destruction and daily risk of attacks. The Women's Affairs Center reported that all of its staff have been displaced more than once. The Women's Affairs Technical Committee suspended its Gaza operations for close to a year because colleagues had lost children and other family members, and the immediate priority became helping staff survive rather than delivering activities. The Society of Women Graduates described a similarly relentless cycle of displacement, and the psychological impact on staff: *"We were displaced ten times. In the south, we moved from Deir al-Balah, then to Khan Younis, from Khan Younis to Rafah, from Rafah back to Deir al-Balah, and then to Gaza. The experience of displacement still occupies our minds. I keep thinking: will our Lord write for us that we were displaced in our own country? It's hard, hard, very hard."*

> *"A big number of our staff have lost their loved ones. One of the young staff members lost more than 15 of her family. I lost four of my family on the same day."* - Women's Affairs Center

> *"Many of our colleagues lost their children, so they couldn't ask anyone to do any work."* - Women's Affairs Technical Committee

In the West Bank, the direct effects on staff are different but still impactful. Not to Forget Women Society said its entire board of directors and most of its staff had been displaced from Jenin refugee camp, after both of its premises were destroyed. Social norms and family pressure add to the psychological burden to respond to community needs.

> *"The team itself has this kind of burnout and psychological difficulties, the fears, the worries, because most of them are mothers, they have children, but they move from place to place in the West Bank. Even though it's dangerous for them to reach these communities, we continue working."* - Psychosocial Counselling Center for Women

Despite the severity of needs, only one WLO described a structured and resourced intervention to support staff.

> *"We train our staff to learn new strategies and tools to deal with the burnout and the psychological difficulties resulting from the kind of work that we are doing. And we have a group of experts now who do a lot of training for other organisations in the West Bank, especially the social workers and the people who are the teams who are working directly with the people."* - Psychosocial Counselling Center for Women



In most cases, support is informal, with staff supporting each other but without a dedicated internal mechanism for it due to lack of adequate resources. Funding for psychosocial support is primarily targeted at programme or project participants but does not extend to the staff and volunteers delivering assistance. In addition, even where security is the acknowledged root cause of staff distress, funding for safety and security is either not permitted or insufficient.

Recommendations

The recommendations below respond directly to the barriers identified in the interviews and reflect the priorities of participating WLOs, alongside findings from the WLOs/WROs mapping. They are directed primarily at donors, UN agencies, INGOs and humanitarian coordination bodies. Some apply across Palestine; others require different action in Gaza and the West Bank.

1. Fund WLOs as equal partners, not short-term implementers

> *"We need core funding. We need core funds to support ourselves, to support our capacities, to maintain our staff."* - Women's Affairs Technical Committee

- Provide direct, quality funding, including core funding and indirect costs, that covers salaries, governance, administration, rent, equipment, financial systems, communications, monitoring and organisational development – not only activity costs.
    - Set and publish targets for the amount and percentage of funding reaching Palestinian WLOs/WROs, distinguishing direct from indirect funding, and report funding by organisational size and area of operation to track whether it reaches smaller, rural and under-resourced WLOs alongside more established ones.
    - Prioritise funding for smaller organisations in underserved areas, including the northern West Bank, North Gaza, refugee camps and rural communities, as well as Jerusalem-based organisations, rather than concentrating resources in Ramallah and Gaza City.
    - Tailor grant sizes and requirements to organisations' needs and capacities, including those of community-based and informal WLOs.
- Maintain funding for economic empowerment, legal aid, advocacy, education and longer-term programming alongside emergency response, so WLOs are not forced to abandon their mandates or the communities they served prior to October 2023 whenever donor priorities shift.
- Provide flexible, longer-term funding to sustain and scale WLO-designed approaches that have enabled services to continue despite access restrictions, including mobile and decentralised services, partnerships with local CBOs and volunteers, secure digital documentation, cash and in-kind assistance, and locally led livelihood initiatives. These adaptations should complement – not substitute for – safe access, functioning public services and adequate, predictable funding.
    - Cover the additional costs required for safe and flexible delivery across Palestine, recognising that some costs may be particularly acute in specific contexts. In Gaza, priorities include temporary premises, connectivity, cash-transfer costs and rapid budget revisions; in the West Bank, safe transport, overnight stays and decentralised delivery also require specific support.
- Fund staff and volunteer psychosocial support, supervision, rest and recovery, collective care and trauma-informed organisational practice – in addition to mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) for participants.

2. Make procedures proportionate, contextualised and workable

> *"Donors… need to take into consideration the specificity of the situation in Gaza… and to lessen their procedures and requests."* - Women's Affairs Center

- Simplify and harmonise applications, due diligence, vendor registration, grant management and compliance rules and regulations, and reporting. Requirements should be proportionate to grant value, organisational size and risk, with less frequent reporting for small grants.
- Preserve donor flexibility as funding passes down through each intermediary and require intermediaries to disclose to local partners which conditions come from the donor and which they have added.
- Adapt donor requirements relating to board elections, registration and approvals when displacement or active hostilities make compliance impossible. Work with relevant authorities in Palestine and banks to secure flexibility in the relevant timelines and prevent administrative delays from freezing the accounts of otherwise compliant organisations.
- Review screening clauses with partners to prevent discriminatory, politically loaded or overly broad requirements that delegitimise Palestinian civil society or damage trust with community actors, while maintaining accountability and transparency.
- Provide practical support to transfer and access funds safely where banking services, currency availability or withdrawals are constrained; do not treat delays created by the operating environment as partner underperformance.
- Press for banking and financial channels serving Palestinian civil society to remain accessible, and ensure that screening and compliance measures do not create disproportionate barriers to WLOs' access to and transfer of funds.
- Advocate for the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure, including WLO staff, premises and assets, and support independent investigations and accountability for violations.

3. Shift from subcontracting to shared power, risk and responsibility

> *"Women and girls in Gaza must be recognised not only as recipients of humanitarian assistance, but as rights-holders, leaders and active actors… Localisation must translate into genuine power-sharing and influence."* - Society of Women Graduates

- Co-design programmes, budgets, indicators, and changes in delivery with WLOs from the outset. Treat them as co-leads with decision-making authority, not delivery partners consulted after priorities have been set.
- Position international intermediaries, both UN agencies and INGOs, as enablers, advocates and risk-sharing partners where capable local organisations exist. Avoid parallel direct implementation that competes with or undermines local actors, and recruitment practices that weaken their staffing capacity.

- Agree roles and responsibilities transparently, including how compliance, safeguarding, visibility, security, and reporting risks will be shared and managed. International intermediaries should renegotiate burdensome requirements with donors rather than transferring them downstream.
- Profile and credit WLOs' expertise and achievements in communications, fundraising and advocacy, subject to partners' consent and safety preferences, and compensate them for the time and resources involved in contributing evidence and expertise.
- Build equitable partnerships with community-based WLOs and organisations led by rural women, women with disabilities, and others, without making formal registration an automatic prerequisite for support.

4. Turn participation into influence

> *"International actors and donors should create meaningful pathways for women-led and local organisations to participate in coordination, policy discussions and resource allocation, including at strategic decision-making levels."* - Society of Women Graduates

- Reserve leadership, co-chairing and governance roles for Palestinian WLOs in clusters, pooled funds, advisory boards and recovery and reconstruction structures, including voting rights and authority over funding allocation decisions.
- Fund the costs of participation, interpretation, connectivity, staff time and safe travel, and develop remote options for organisations in Gaza, camps, and other areas affected by movement restrictions or limited access.
- Make Arabic interpretation the default at coordination meetings, not something WLOs must request, and avoid English-heavy jargon and acronyms in agendas, minutes and cluster documents.
- Involve WLOs across the full range of humanitarian policy discussions, not only where a topic is explicitly framed as a "women's issue".
- Establish transparent feedback mechanisms showing how WLO data and recommendations inform decisions.
- Recognise WLOs as decision-making partners and avoid tokenistic consultation or extractive use of their knowledge.
- Support rotating local-hosting models and sub-regional coordination hubs outside Ramallah and Gaza City and connect CBOs to existing Palestinian networks and coalitions.