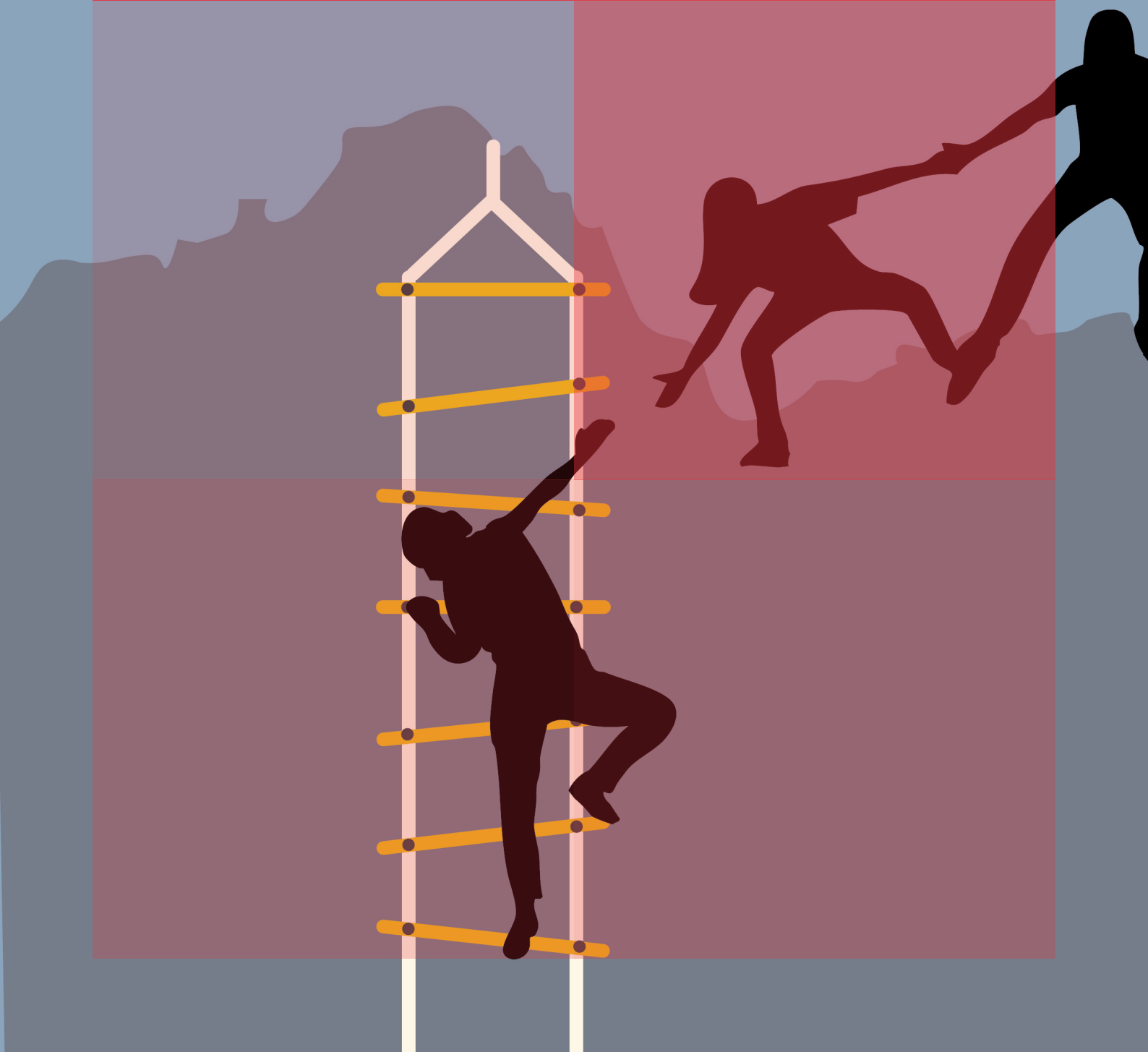
HPG WORKING PAPER

How women lead

Women-led organisations as humanitarian crisis responders

Manny Maung[ID], Caterina Mazzilli[ID] and Megan Daigle[ID]

September 2025



This material has been funded by UK aid from the UK government.

How to cite: Maung, M., Mazzilli, C. and Daigle, M. (2025) *How women lead: women-led organisations as humanitarian crisis responders*. HPG working paper. London: ODI Global (www.odi.org/en/publications/how-women-lead-women-led-organisations-as-humanitarian-crisis-responders).

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Cover graphic: Jessica Rennoldson/HPG

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to Lipi Rahman (Babadon Sangho), Anila Noor (New Women Connectors), Jacqueline Hart (Feminist Humanitarian Network), Batoul Aleita (Women Now for Development), John Bryant (Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG)), Jessica Skinner (Palladium Humanitarian and Stabilisation Operations Team (HSOT)) and Helen Lindley-Jones (UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)) for their careful reading of early drafts of this paper. We also thank Kathryn O'Neill, Jessica Rennoldson, Emma Carter and Sara Hussain for their support in the production of the paper, and Marika de Faramond for facilitating the project as a whole.

About this report

This report and associated research were enabled by support from the UK FCDO's Humanitarian Diplomacy Fund.

About the authors

ORCID numbers are given where available. Please click on the ID icon next to an author's name in order to access their ORCID listing.

Manny Maung[ID] is a Research Associate in HPG at ODI Global.

Dr Caterina Mazzilli[ID] is a Research Officer on migration at HPG at ODI Global.

Dr Megan Daigle[ID] is a Senior Research Fellow at HPG.

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Acronyms

AAP	accountability to affected populations
CAFOD	Catholic Agency for Overseas Development
CBPF	country-based pooled fund
CHI	Community Healthcare Initiative (Liberia)
CSW	Commission on the Status of Women
DAC	Development Assistance Committee (OECD)
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
DRR	disaster risk reduction
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (United Kingdom)
FHN	Feminist Humanitarian Network
GADN	Gender and Development Network
GBV	gender-based violence
GDN	Gender and Disaster Network
HPG	Humanitarian Policy Group
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IDP	internally displaced person
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
IRC	International Rescue Committee
LBT	lesbian, bisexual and trans
LGBTQI+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex plus
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (United Nations)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PPE	personal protective equipment
SEAH	sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment
SGBV	sexual and gender-based violence
SIHA	Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa
SOGIESC	sexual orientation, gender identity/expression or sex characteristics
SRHR	sexual and reproductive health rights

STI	sexually transmitted infection
WASH	water, sanitation and hygiene
WEO	Women Empowerment Organization (Iraq)
WFC	Women for Change (South Sudan)
WLO	women-led organisation
WND	Women Now for Development (Syria)
WPS-HA	Compact on Women, Peace and Security and Humanitarian Action
WRO	women's rights organisation
UN	United Nations
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Executive summary

Women-led organisations (WLOs) play a critical role in leading responses to humanitarian crises and meeting immediate needs, but they remain chronically underfunded and excluded from humanitarian decision-making and coordination. The failure to collect and collate data on the work of WLOs has prevented strategic progress on better support. This paper documents how WLOs play a critical role in responding to crises, using case studies to illustrate. Although WLOs have long asserted their importance during crisis response, their role has often been overlooked.

Interest in WLOs has been growing in the humanitarian sector, but in the first half of 2025, this conversation has unfolded alongside major cuts to funding for gender and humanitarian action (which are already hitting WLOs hard), and intense anti-gender politics. This 'humanitarian reset' promises a system that 'must be accountable to crisis-affected women and girls, and increase funding to women-led organisations' (IASC, 2025b), but it is not yet clear what this will mean. At this moment, actors at all levels should rethink their usual ways of working and direct further support towards WLOs.

This paper, commissioned by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), is a rapid, non-comprehensive review of published evidence on the role and impact of WLOs. Its objective is to build consensus on the value of better funding for these groups.

Effective humanitarian action across sectors

WLOs are a diverse category of actors, ranging from smaller, grassroots organisations to established national entities. They are embedded in local, national and regional settings, with considerable contextual knowledge. This report covers the following non-exhaustive list of sectoral concerns (although not reflected here, the main report includes case studies to highlight the impact and value of WLOs' work in each thematic area).

- **Protection.** WLOs are trusted by their local communities, which is critical for protection work. They create safe spaces for women, girls and gender-diverse people. They provide a holistic response, encompassing practical services, education and awareness of gender-based violence (GBV), and rights-based approaches. Data suggest that survivors of GBV are more likely to report incidents of GBV, and to do so sooner, if they can report to an organisation they already know.
- **Health.** Agility is key to responding to health crises such as epidemics. During the Covid-19 pandemic, WLOs responded rapidly. They designed and delivered health services, community outreach, personal protective equipment (PPE), responses to GBV, livelihoods support, and education work. WLOs have also been found to facilitate access to non-judgemental and dignified sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) services.
- **Food security.** Research suggests that including women meaningfully in decision-making spaces strengthens food security. WLOs are well placed to identify and mitigate risks of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH) linked to food crises. They also tend to identify different food security

risks to those identified by international actors – including gender discrimination, lack of decision-making power, climate change and financial crises – which enables longer-term prevention and resilience work.

- **Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH).** WLOs recognise that a lack of access to sanitary products and hygiene resources (period poverty) is exacerbated during crises, increasing risks of disease, social anxiety and poor mental health.
- **Shelter.** WLOs are often the first to provide alternative housing, whether for people fleeing crises or for women and girls escaping domestic violence. WLO staff may themselves be displaced during crises.

Humanitarian coordination and delivery

As WLOs have often been established prior to crises, or emerge organically in response to crisis-related needs in their communities, they take a cross-sectoral and holistic approach that does not necessarily conform to the siloed structure of the aid sector. Although the terms of humanitarian coordination and delivery often do not align with WLOs' ways of working, they are already active in many priority areas. For example, WLOs come with unparalleled access to communities, which is essential to rapid and appropriate response to crises.

WLOs are also present in humanitarian coordination platforms and spaces. For example, Women for Change co-chairs the GBV Working Group in Warrap State, South Sudan, and the Feminist Humanitarian Network (FHN) has a leadership role in the Grand Bargain and United Nations (UN) forums. Research has shown that because they work across sectors and thematics, WLOs are critical for longer-term resilience and recovery, as they use existing grassroots processes and networks to meet needs and improve resilience to shocks. Supporting WLOs helps communities to build back better for the future, and achieve social change in the wake of crises where communities see fit.

Inclusive, accessible and participatory responses

WLOs and other local organisations working with socially excluded groups (especially those that face multiple and overlapping forms of marginalisation) know the structures of inequality within their own communities. They are ideally positioned to redirect humanitarian responses to the most vulnerable people, and to identify the particular needs, risks and capacities of these groups. These include:

- women refugee-led organisations;
- lesbian, bisexual and trans WLOs;
- organisations led by women and girls with disabilities.

They also include other, less visible populations such as sex workers, Roma women, older women, widows, adolescent girls, Indigenous women and Dalit women.

Conclusion

Evidence about the full role of WLOs remains scant, and there is a pressing need to invest in more research. Yet it is clear that WLOs have long been leading impactful and effective humanitarian responses. Building financial and other support for them is thus both a practical and an ethical imperative. Given the current context, there has never been a more urgent need to promote more equitable, just and inclusive ways of working between local, grassroots and national WLOs and international actors. This is essential in order to avoid replicating oppressive, duplicative and inequitable relationships that do harm to WLOs and the communities in which they work.

1 Introduction

Women-led organisations (WLOs) play a critical role in leading responses to humanitarian crises and meeting immediate needs. Nonetheless, they remain chronically underfunded and excluded from humanitarian decision-making and coordination. These challenges are particularly acute for WLOs that are led by, or work with and for, people experiencing intersecting forms of marginalisation – for example, women and girls with disabilities; older women; adolescent girls; refugee women; or lesbian, transgender or bisexual women.

There is still no shared understanding within the international assistance sector of the value of funding WLOs in humanitarian action – a fact that has prevented strategic progress on the issue. To date, there has also been very limited in-depth research documenting WLOs' work, or their experience navigating the international humanitarian architecture. This reflects a lack of investment, not just in WLOs, but in evidencing and substantiating the work they are already doing. In this paper, we document the current role that WLOs are playing in crisis response, collating snapshots and examples drawn from evaluations, case studies and other published sources. Together, these demonstrate the value and impact of WLOs' work, which is so often unseen by the international humanitarian sector.

Importantly, WLOs themselves have long been making the case for the critical nature of their work, and have highlighted the many barriers they encounter (see Box 1). While this paper provides evidence to support WLOs' own efforts to achieve financial support and decision-making power, the authors are keenly aware that the perceived need for this evidence is heavily shaped by exclusive models of humanitarian response that have thus far marginalised the voices of WLOs. Better support for and recognition of WLOs is therefore not just an important acknowledgement of their unique positioning, strengths and capacities within humanitarian response, it is also an ethical imperative. It speaks to commitments to more participatory, inclusive responses that are led by crisis-affected people themselves in the spirit of 'nothing about us without us'.[1] Any analysis of the successes of WLOs must also be set against the backdrop of a wider humanitarian system that fails to effectively use the resources allocated to it or to fully meet crisis-related needs (Moallin, 2024).

1 The slogan 'nothing about us without us' originates from disability rights activism, but it has since been used by diverse movements for social justice and inclusion. It speaks to the principle that policies should not be created or implemented without participation by members of the group(s) affected by those policies.

Box 1 Barriers to participation of WLOs in crisis response

It is intensely problematic to engage in any kind of assessment of WLOs' strengths and successes as crisis responders without also considering the incredibly restrictive context within which they operate. The barriers facing WLOs as they seek funding and access to humanitarian decision-making and coordination spaces have been well documented, by WLOs themselves, the networks representing them, and women's and feminist funds (FHN, 2021; Black Feminist Fund, 2024; Equality Fund, 2024; Feminist Alchemy, 2024; Sekyiamah and Provost, 2024; Noor, 2024; Martin, forthcoming).

These systemic and structural hurdles to WLOs' full and active participation in humanitarian response. They include:

- **Lack of available funding**. This is likely to worsen significantly in the current context of aid cuts and donor governments refocusing on narrow visions of national interest.
- **Low quality of available funding**. Most humanitarian funding is short-term, project-based and heavily restricted to donor priorities. This leaves WLOs unable to plan (sometimes beyond six months), pursue their own priorities, make strategic programming choices, or invest in organisational development. Such funding rarely supports core or overhead operational costs for WLOs.
- **Onerous reporting and accountability requirements imposed by funders and intermediaries**. These are an excessive administrative burden for smaller and grassroots WLOs, diverting resources from their core mission or excluding them from such funding streams entirely.
- **Under-reporting and under-monitoring of funding to WLOs**. States have consistently failed to provide sufficient data on localisation-related funding streams, with an even poorer track record of gathering data on WLOs.
- **Reliance on intermediaries and North–South funding flows**. A lack of capacity among donors to manage and disburse smaller pots of funding means that WLOs are forced to access funding that is cascaded via intermediaries rather than directly from donors. These intermediaries (usually international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) or UN agencies based in the Global North) are often unaccountable, and may exert undue influence on WLOs' operations and priorities, or take credit for their work.
- **Misconceptions around capacity, risk and neutrality**. Donors often regard WLOs (given their often explicit social justice mission and small, grassroots scale) as 'risky' partners, leading to more intense scrutiny; some donors even prefer to work with organisations in the Global North. This demonstrates the need to query assumptions and consider risks beyond those affecting funders, including risks to WLOs themselves amidst shrinking civic space, and risks to their communities if donors fail to support their work.

Even those funding models that are regularly proposed as solutions to unequal distribution of funds can prove to be out of reach for WLOs. For example, WLOs struggle to meet the onerous application requirements to access the longer-term and larger funding streams offered by country-based pooled funds (CBPFs) (IRC, 2023). In 2024, the CBPFs and regional pooled funds increased the number of WLOs receiving direct or indirect funding to 148, up from 122 in the previous year. They also intensified their efforts to incorporate WLOs into 18 of 21 advisory boards (UN OCHA, 2025: 42,36), but it is clear that there is much more to be done.

Despite the critical role of WLOs and their documented successes, international actors frequently overlook WLOs' work in key areas such as relief, education and healthcare, while at the same time relying on them heavily (IRC, 2020; Pinnington, 2023; Sekyiamah and Provost, 2024). This generates frustrations among WLOs, as documented by FHN (2021), the Equality Fund (2024) and others.

In light of the barriers facing WLOs, any successes are impressive. Scale-up of these can only happen with more and better investment and acknowledgement of the role WLOs are playing.

In that light, WLOs representing diverse women, girls and gender-diverse people should be understood as 'by and for' organisations: although they work on all areas of response, they are also uniquely positioned to understand the intersecting and complex needs of marginalised groups, and operate with an ethos of solidarity-building, collective action and 'power with'.[2] The chilling effect of the current wave of anti-gender politics and global backlash against women's and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex plus (LGBTQI+) rights is already evident in the international assistance sphere. In this context, efforts to achieve more inclusive, diverse and equitable humanitarian responses – specifically those that are more gender-just and feminist – are more important than ever.

2 'Power with' refers to the capacity of a group to pursue shared goals through collective action, thereby engendering a sense of agency and community collaboration. This concept stands in contrast to 'power over', where one individual or group exerts influence over another through coercion or imbalanced power dynamics (Pansardi and Bindi, 2021).

1.1 Global context: funding, politics and the humanitarian reset

In the first half of 2025, we found ourselves in the midst of a growing conversation about WLOs as crisis responders within the international humanitarian sector. This was marked by a convening of stakeholders at Wilton Park in February 2024 and a dedicated discussion at the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative in October 2024.[3] The past three decades have also seen numerous commitments, by states and humanitarian actors alike, to gender-responsive humanitarian action, localisation, accountability to affected populations (AAP), and combating gender-based violence (GBV), all of which should motivate further engagement in this area.[4]

However, this conversation is now unfolding alongside the dismantling of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and a series of executive orders issued by US President Donald Trump aiming to end 'diversity, equity and inclusion', both domestically and internationally. Shortly after, the Dutch government announced sweeping cuts of €2.4 billion by 2027, under which funding for gender equality will be 'terminated' (Government of the Netherlands, 2025). These policy choices can be seen as related to a longstanding and coordinated backlash against women's and LGBTQI+ rights, which include specific opposition to gender justice as an objective of international assistance or foreign policy (Khan et al., 2023; Holmes, 2024).

In late February 2025, the UK government also announced that it will cut its aid budget from 0.5% to 0.3% of gross national income, leaving its international assistance budget 'at its lowest for decades' (O'Sullivan and Puri, 2025). The UK's Minister of State for International Development, speaking to the International Development Parliamentary Select Committee in May 2025, indicated that cuts will most likely fall on 'education and gender' – a statement that was condemned by humanitarian and development actors (GADN, 2025). Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland have also made major funding cuts to their overall spending on development and humanitarian response (Lahiri, 2025; O'Sullivan and Puri, 2025).

Funding constraints have always shaped the international humanitarian system's ability to provide support to all crisis-affected people. However, upheaval within the system and funding cuts since early 2025 are bringing about a new reform agenda: the so-called 'humanitarian reset', which aims to recalibrate spending and delivery of assistance in the midst of growing crises, cuts and painful choices (IASC, 2025a). As the reset takes shape, there is ongoing uncertainty about what it means for inclusive and participatory humanitarian responses, as well as gender-responsive programming within

3 A summary of discussions at the Wilton Park convention was published shortly afterward (Wilton Park, 2024).

4 For examples of commitments to gender-responsiveness, see: the World Humanitarian Summit Core Commitments; Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) policy and accountability frameworks and the IASC Gender Handbook; the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Gender Equality Policy Marker; the G7's Whistler Declaration on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls in Humanitarian Action; and Generation Equality Forum's Compact on Women, Peace and Security and Humanitarian Action (WPS-HA). For examples of commitments on supporting locally led humanitarian action, see successive iterations of the Grand Bargain since its inception in 2016.

those responses. Although the most recent statement from the UN's Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Tom Fletcher, promises a system that 'must be accountable to crisis-affected women and girls, and increase funding to women-led organisations' (IASC, 2025b), it also promises to devolve decision-making to humanitarian country teams and in-country coordinators. This raises questions about how to ensure alignment across these decision-making structures, and how to avoid fragmentation or deprioritisation of already limited funding and space for WLOs within humanitarian coordination.

The impact of these cuts on WLOs in crisis settings is already becoming clear from early analyses and rapid surveys. The Center for Global Development lists the eight countries most exposed to the US aid cuts; in six of those, spending was focused on 'emergency response': Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan (Mitchell and Hughes, 2025). UN Women, which surveyed 411 WLOs in 44 crisis settings in March 2025, called the findings 'stark':

> Ninety percent of surveyed organizations reported being financially impacted, with 47% expecting to shut down within six months if current conditions persist ... Organizations report that programmes and services in GBV response (67%), protection (62%), livelihoods and multipurpose cash assistance (58%), and health care (52%) have been the most affected. (UN Women, 2025a: 3; see also ICVA, 2025)

This is therefore a key moment: the profound impact of these attacks on inclusive approaches must be recognised. Actors at all levels should rethink their usual ways of working and direct further support towards locally led, inclusive and accessible humanitarian relief initiatives. Amidst rising instability worldwide, the strong links between gender justice, women's representation in decision-making forums, and stable, democratic societies should be re-emphasised. These links make it all the more important to support WLOs and their work, both during crises and in post-crisis recovery (Khan and Sharp, 2025).

1.2 Differentiating WLOs

The IASC offers the following definition, also used by the Grand Bargain secretariat and the UN Partner Portal, of a local women-led organisation:

> ...An organization with a humanitarian mandate and/or mission that is (1) governed or directed by women; or 2) whose leadership is principally made up of women, demonstrated by 50 per cent or more occupying senior leadership positions. (IASC, 2024: 2)

In the available literature and related advocacy, the terms 'women-led organisation' (WLO), 'women's rights organisation' (WRO) and 'feminist organisation' are often used interchangeably. Some international actors prefer 'WLO' because it is seen to align more clearly with their commitment to 'neutral' and 'needs-based' humanitarian action, and to facilitate clearer definitions for the purposes of tracking spending. Others are more comfortable with rights-based approaches, or at least recognise

that the distinction between needs-based and rights-based approaches is less contentious for place-based organisations than it is for international humanitarian agencies (Moallin et al., 2025). Throughout this paper, we replicate the language used in the sources consulted.

This question of terminology also speaks to a common assumption that needs to be corrected: that WLOs necessarily focus on the needs of women and girls only, or on GBV response only. It is true that many WLOs do prioritise GBV and the specific needs of women and girls, as they are well placed to act as 'by and for' organisations, and their priorities reflect the gendered realities facing communities in crisis settings around the world. However, in practice, WLOs work on all areas of humanitarian response – a fact that is borne out by the evidence collated here. Their work should not be conflated with or reduced to GBV response alone.

The WLOs discussed in this paper range from smaller, grassroots organisations to more established and even national entities. All of them are operating in crisis settings and working in and with crisis-affected populations. Throughout, the diversity of WLOs becomes apparent – a fact that demonstrates the wide range of actors that count as WLOs, complicates assumptions about them and their capacities, and will necessarily shape policy proposals to support them better.

1.3 About this research

This paper is part of a wider research project, commissioned by the UK FCDO and led by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG), which examines the financial and decision-making landscape for WLOs that are active in responding to humanitarian crises. Throughout the project, the research team is benefiting from co-convening and consultation with FHN (a global collective of feminist leaders working together to transform the humanitarian system into one guided by feminist principles) and its members.

Given the rapid and light-touch nature of this project, researchers were limited to using secondary materials for this paper, many of which are not subject to peer review or external verification.[5] The research team does not explicitly provide recommendations for specific actions by donors, but instead collates evidence and case studies to demonstrate the breadth and scope of the important work of WLOs. The paper is oriented towards readers working within the international humanitarian system.

This paper will be followed by a discussion paper mapping current funding flows and mechanisms in more detail, as well as proposals designed in consultation with WLOs for an enhanced funding ecosystem that is more conducive to supporting WLOs' strategies, needs and leadership.

The methodology for this paper entailed a survey of existing policy, academic and grey literature on WLOs and women's leadership in humanitarian crisis and response. Researchers conducted targeted

5 The lack of rigorous evidence of WLOs' impact in crisis settings is an ongoing problem and a further reflection of low levels of investment in WLOs by funders of all kinds. This will be explored in more detail in a forthcoming discussion paper.

searches in key databases of research studies, reviews, toolkits, briefing papers, evaluations and other sources since 2010. As already noted, the existing research is neither extensive nor systematic. However, it is notable that there is strong agreement among the sources reviewed on the particular strengths of WLOs, reflecting the advocacy and testimony of WLOs themselves and their networks.

The objective of this project is to contribute to building consensus across multiple stakeholders for new ways of working as humanitarians. The research will offer a springboard for international actors to begin reframing the humanitarian system to better leverage the strength and expertise of WLOs. Our intention is to create an open and hopeful space to imagine collectively what a better future for WLOs and their communities could look like, bringing together, building on and appreciating existing visions and the work already happening during challenging times.

Across this report, each thematic section (e.g., 2.1 Protection or 2.2. Health) is followed by one or more case studies illustrating how WLOs are making an impact in that area in crisis settings around the world. These case studies are drawn from Bangladesh, Burundi, Chile, Ghana, Iraq, Kenya, Lebanon, Liberia, Poland, Puerto Rico, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Türkiye, Uganda, Ukraine and Vanuatu.

2 Impact on key aspects of humanitarian action

Although at policy level there is increasing recognition that WLOs are critical to providing a rapid and localised response to humanitarian crises, there is still a lack of formal recognition of their capabilities and contributions within international humanitarian aid structures. Being embedded in local, national and regional settings means that WLOs offer precious contextual knowledge, which other actors (especially external ones, including international and even national agencies and entities) lack, and would struggle to build up in the long term. This frequently includes Indigenous knowledge that comes in forms that are often misunderstood, overlooked by or inaccessible to international humanitarian actors (Adhikari, 2024). This grounding in context means that WLOs are aware of 'gaps, needs, risks, norms and power relations' within the local community, and can respond to an emergency appropriately (Njeri and Daigle, 2022: 9; see also FHN, 2021; Women's Refugee Commission et al., 2021; Luqman, 2023; Khoury and Scott, 2024).

Here, we collate examples and case studies that demonstrate the value and impact of WLOs, according to the humanitarian sector's own thematic areas of concern. Each section provides overarching reflections based on the literature, before highlighting case studies that illustrate the impact of WLOs. This overview is not comprehensive; it is focused on those areas where published evidence is available.

However, it is important to note that even crisis-related needs do not map neatly onto humanitarian silos. The sectors referred to in the sections that follow (protection, health, food security, WASH and shelter) are themselves the creation of international actors; they do not necessarily reflect the priorities or objectives of WLOs or of the communities they work in and with. Many of the examples here therefore speak to multiple thematic priorities, and may also extend beyond what the international sector understands as a strictly humanitarian mandate. As a result, the value-added of WLOs to humanitarian action, as described in this chapter, may not fully reflect their value to their communities.

2.1 Protection

WLOs benefit from the trust of their local communities, which is paramount to effective and timely response to crises, especially when it comes to protection. In one study, Njeri and Daigle point out that having the trust of the community at the outset, rather than having to negotiate for it, puts WROs in a position of advantage in terms of operating efficiently (Njeri and Daigle, 2022: 36; see also Women's Refugee Commission et al., 2021).

Specifically, WLOs create safe spaces for women, girls and gender-diverse individuals that are crucial for protection and leadership development, particularly during ongoing crises. WLOs hold a unique position among affected communities in advancing rights-based approaches, GBV education and

awareness, and providing practical services for survivors (who may hold more trust in them than in international actors). Given their long-term presence in communities, WLOs are also particularly committed to prevention (see the box in Section 3.2 for the WLOs' perspectives on the value they bring).

For example, in the DRC, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) shifted its approach to partnerships with community-based WLOs after reviewing the programme monitoring data of 12,000 survivors (Guimond and and Robinette, 2014). Although IRC does not name its WLO partners in this instance, the data showed that survivors were more likely to report incidents of GBV (and to do so sooner after the incident) if they could speak to someone they trusted, such as individuals from a WLO. The IRC review also found that reports of intimate partner violence increased when collaborating with local organisations, suggesting that survivors felt more at ease reporting to groups they already knew (ibid.).

2.1.1 SIHA Network and its members in Sudan

Since the outbreak of civil war in Sudan in 2023, the conflict has seen escalating human rights violations, including widespread GBV (and especially sexual violence). This has been categorised as a war crime, and has a disproportionate impact on women and girls. People with disabilities or who have been displaced by the conflict are particularly at risk. The Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA) Network commissioned a qualitative study across nine regions of Sudan. Its findings show how, building on women's key roles in the 2019 Sudanese revolution, grassroots WLOs have:

> Mobilis[ed] communities, supporting each other and amplifying women's voices to address the immediate needs of women but also to push for change and meaningful participation in decision-making positions. (International IDEA et al., 2024: 13)

In Sudan, WLOs have increased communities' access to services (including shelter, medical and legal services, and, critically, GBV response) through direct provision of services and coordination with state and international actors. Their approach to direct support for survivors of GBV is joined up and holistic, going beyond what international actors are able to offer. Services include prevention and safety training, medical and legal support, awareness-raising on child marriage and other aspects of GBV, and mental health and psychosocial support. Researchers noted that WLOs 'can provide services and, in some cases, protection – for the latter, women's groups affiliated with political groups were noted as better placed to protect women' (International IDEA et al., 2024: 19). These WLOs also document cases of GBV in their communities and advocate at the local, regional and national levels to change laws and increase recognition of how GBV is being used in the conflict.

During interviews, members of the SIHA Network also highlighted the dual nature of women's exposure to GBV in the Sudanese conflict: women and girls are at risk both as individuals (as a result of the wider conflict), and as groups of activists targeted with violence for their work, which has led to threats, assaults and displacement. Shrinking civic space has contributed to these risks, as WLOs and their staff

have been harassed and arrested, and bureaucratic processes instrumentalised against them to shut down their operations. WLOs' strategies for coping with these risks include forming their own networks within Sudan and in neighbouring countries, and partnering with international actors (ibid.: 27).

The work done by WLOs on GBV response and related advocacy has served a dual purpose in Sudan. It allows them to respond to cases of GBV while also giving WLOs and individual women activists a platform through which to network and collaborate to achieve common goals. Thus, researchers argue that the work of WLOs in Sudan is both life-saving and long term, and that it has a 'multiplier' effect for achieving localisation (ibid.: 9–10):

> Respondents say that becoming activists and volunteers themselves helps them cope. Activism thus also has a healing role for women affected by the conflict, increasing the number, impact and role of feminist initiatives. (ibid.: 19)

Feminist initiatives have challenged the notion that women are solely victims of conflict (see also Daigle et al., 2025). This has shifted narratives around women's social and economic roles, their importance as community pillars responding to shared needs, and their key role in peacebuilding.

2.1.2 Combatting gender-based violence in Iraq

Despite international actors deciding to deprioritise gender and WLOs during the Covid-19 pandemic (FHN, 2021), WLOs in Iraq demonstrated agility and deep familiarity with their communities' needs. Being embedded in their communities allowed them to continue providing support to survivors of GBV amidst public health restrictions. It also meant they were able to track and respond to increases in GBV brought about by isolation and other adverse conditions during the pandemic.

Research by Women Empowerment Organization (WEO) and Oxfam (2023) showed that 80% of the WLOs consulted had rapidly changed their activities in response to the pandemic. According to a worker from Together for a Better Life Foundation, located in Nineveh, 'All our work turned into relief' (WEO and Oxfam, 2023: 6). Their activities included sewing masks, distributing sterilisers, assembling and sharing food baskets, and leading awareness-raising campaigns.

Yet almost two-thirds of participating WLOs said they 'continued to monitor gender-based violence incidents to capture and share data on how the pandemic exacerbated rates of violence' (ibid.: 7). In an interview, the director of one WLO, Bent Al-Rafedain, described a 'crucial gap' in attention to and services for survivors of GBV amidst the pandemic by national authorities and international actors. As a result, Bent Al-Rafedain provided food and livelihoods assistance tailored to survivors, as well as lobbying Babylon Provincial Council to include a woman doctor in its crisis response (ibid.). Similarly, the Baghdad Women's Association operated a helpline for survivors of GBV who were unable to access protection services due to pandemic-related restrictions on movement, or the shutdown of relevant programmes (ibid.).

Another WLO, Hawa Organization for Relief and Development, provided psychosocial support and legal aid and healthcare to women through its listening and counselling centres. Hawa also conducted needs assessments and questionnaires on behalf of international actors, even though it reported not receiving any funding for relief activities (Oxfam, 2023).

2.1.3 Women's Mediators Network in Burundi

A third example comes from a rapid review published by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), *Inclusion in crisis response, recovery and resilience* (Carter, 2021). Although conflict mitigation may be seen as outside the purview of the humanitarian sector, the relationships created during mediation are essential in gaining trust. They therefore enable WLOs to play a unique role as humanitarian responders while contributing to longer-term measures of crisis prevention.

In 2015, in Burundi, the UN established the Women's Mediators Network in close partnership with the Ministry of Interior and civil society organisations, including WLOs. The mediators, working in groups of four across 129 municipalities, addressed more than 3,000 local conflicts. Their activities included advocating for the release of protesters and opposition party members, promoting tolerance, and countering misinformation to constructively handle political and electoral conflicts (ibid.).

2.2 Health

As with protection, the work of WLOs during health crises demonstrates their embeddedness in communities and their agility. Both qualities are essential when it comes to meeting the unique demands of epidemics and pandemics – whether as crises in their own right or as complicating factors in settings already affected by complex, overlapping crises. The role of WLOs during the Covid-19 pandemic could not have been more critical, demonstrating just how crucial they are to effective crisis response and management in their communities. The breadth and depth of this type of work is captured in FHN's global report (FHN, 2021) and accompanying country reports detailing member WLOs' work in Bangladesh, Kenya, Lebanon, Liberia, Nepal, Nigeria, Palestine and South Africa. WLOs' pandemic response encompassed direct health services as well as community outreach and awareness-raising, production and provision of PPE, targeted response to incidents of GBV arising from pandemic-related isolation measures, livelihoods support, and education work.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are often given lower priority than other areas of humanitarian response. Existing programming typically focuses on maternal health or interventions related to GBV for heterosexual, cisgender women of reproductive age (Daigle et al., 2023). In Lebanon, research shows that WLOs are a key enabler of access to SRHR services: amid overlapping crises where the health needs of people displaced from Syria and Palestine are not being met, local organisations operating with an explicit rights lens act as facilitators of non-judgemental and dignified treatment (ibid.).

2.2.1 Marsa Sexual Health Center in Lebanon

In Lebanon, where the country's compound crises have negatively impacted the SRHR response, Marsa Sexual Health Center in Beirut is working to fill the gaps. It provides medical consultations, testing services, and a number of other SRHR services, including for HIV, and care for and prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Lebanon hosts the highest number of refugees per capita of any country in the world. People's needs for SRHR services are more acute at times of (and following) crises, yet access and services are extremely limited. In Lebanon's crisis-affected communities (as in many other settings), cultural and social norms around sex and intimacy prevent people openly discussing SRHR concerns, even with medical professionals. Subjects such as menstruation and regular gynaecological or sexual health check-ups are taboo, while sex education is often withheld, both at school and in the home.

Marsa was a notable example of a sexual health centre providing non-discriminatory, inclusive and welcoming services to anyone seeking SRHR care, including those from the LGBTQI+ community. Community-based services such as Marsa have garnered trust from people seeking services but the lack of broader services has also placed pressure on the organisation, with reports of extended wait times and staff shortages. In the study noted above, which found that WLOs are key facilitators of access to SRHR services, multiple participants cited Marsa by name as having facilitated their own access (ibid.).

2.2.2 Responding to the Covid-19 pandemic in Kenya and South Sudan

In the context of the pandemic, WLOs' awareness of and familiarity with power dynamics in their communities aided their response. They were able to share information through channels that benefited everyone in their local community, including those at greater risk of social exclusion, such as people with disabilities. In research conducted anonymously with eight WROs in South Sudan and 12 in Kenya, Njeri and Daigle (2022) found that WLOs were aware that certain groups within their local communities could become marginalised by the pandemic, so they decided to adopt an intersectional approach. They worked at the grassroots level, setting up SMS and WhatsApp channels for information-sharing; and at the national level, they:

> ...lobbied their respective government health ministries for better accommodations, including sign language interpretation, to ensure that critical health messaging did not exclude [people with disabilities]. (Njeri and Daigle, 2022: 19)

South Sudanese and Kenyan WROs also incorporated a sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) response, and even vaccination, into their existing programming:

> Their contextual knowledge meant they understood pre-existing risks of SGBV, and their community engagement [on Covid-19] included messages around the mitigation of SGBV, alongside support to survivors [of SGBV]. (ibid.: 21)

Finally, WROs' contextual knowledge helped to address issues such as mask-sharing. Their response included engaging communities to produce their own PPE and sanitisers.

Although the impacts of the work of these WLOs in Kenya and South Sudan have not been formally measured, their alertness to the challenges facing women, girls and people with disabilities within their communities was a key strength. It led to greater attention to and inclusion of these marginalised groups in government responses, arguably reducing the need for more costly and intensive targeted assistance by humanitarians. In overcoming barriers to accessing appropriate pandemic measures for marginalised groups, the WLOs contributed to a truly impartial response to both the Covid-19 pandemic and overlapping crises of displacement, conflict and drought in Kenya and South Sudan.

2.2.3 Community Healthcare Initiative in Liberia

Founded just before the 2014 outbreak of Ebola in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea, the Community Healthcare Initiative (CHI) in Liberia became a key part of the civil society response that filled gaps in government provision weakened by war and insufficient infrastructure. The epidemic brought about a 70% mortality rate, including up to 59% among hospitalised patients. CHI responded with handwashing stands in schools. It also provided training on infection prevention and control, working directly with county-level health teams, schools and parent–teacher associations to manage infections.[6]

In an interview with the International Association of Professionals in Humanitarian Assistance and Protection (PHAP, n.d.), CHI founder Naomi Tulay-Solanke said:

> Local women in my community came together, they responded to the crisis, created awareness and sensitization, they were knocking doors and at the front line. But their roles were not recognized. These women helped in preventing the spread of the disease.

Once the epidemic had subsided, international actors quickly left Liberia, but CHI turned to supporting the women who had responded to the Ebola crisis in health centres, communities and homes. Tulay-Solanke notes in another interview (FHN, n.d.):

> People had lost families, had lost livelihoods. We immediately moved into providing support with a focus on women's health and livelihoods for women responders in order to help build coping mechanisms. We ran this with their consent and their contribution. We rebuilt together.

Based on their experiences with the Ebola response and observing how little space was allocated to women in Liberia's humanitarian sphere, women leaders from CHI and other organisations formed the Liberian Women's Humanitarian Network (now comprising 40 members). They did so to make sure that all women who respond to humanitarian needs in their communities have a space to engage in collective advocacy and response. Building on its Ebola experience, CHI has continued to meet

6 Information from CHI Liberia website (https://chciliberia.org).

humanitarian health needs, reaching more than 55,000 people in 2022 including pregnant women, new mothers, adolescent girls, fathers, community leaders, duty-bearers, and policymakers. It also supported more than 40 local women's groups with seed grants (Community Healthcare Initiative, 2023).

2.3 Food security

Women and girls experience greater food insecurity than men all over the world, 'a gap that has widened since the COVID-19 pandemic' (Forsythe, 2023: 6) even though the relationship between gender and food insecurity is still not well understood or widely acknowledged:

> Gender inequality and food security exist in mutually reinforcing relationships, whereby gender inequality is both a cause and consequence of food insecurity. (ibid.)

Although there has been some research into the gender dimensions of women's vulnerability in humanitarian settings, there is a dearth of evidence rooted in women's perspectives. This includes their strategies for mitigating shocks, particularly on food security and resilience. What is known is that gender inequality is a key driver of hunger, and that it disproportionately affects women, making them the 'majority of the world's hungriest people' (CARE International UK, 2024).

The limited research that is available suggests that including women in decision-making spaces can strengthen food security (Lindley-Jones, 2018; Carter and Kelly, 2021; Forsythe, 2023). Excluding WLOs from meaningful participation in such decision-making spaces leads to 'ineffective and inappropriate acute food insecurity and famine response and planning' (Forsythe, 2023), leaving at-risk populations out of reach, and increasing the risk of SEAH and other abuses in food assistance delivery. It also risks undermining existing responses by those WLOs (Barclay et al., 2016; Lindvall et al., 2020; IFRC, 2022; Rohwerder, 2022; Kevany and Huisingh, 2013, all cited in Forsythe, 2023).

Women's organisations tend to use different or even disparate classification markers to identify risks to food security from those used by mainstream humanitarians, including gender discrimination and lack of decision-making power (Ravon, 2014). In a separate study, grassroots and non-governmental organisation (NGO) women leaders perceived major risks from climate change, financial crisis and food crisis, yet they also did not believe those crises adequately explained the challenges facing their communities (Goldenberg, 2011). In both studies, WLOs recognised that planning around food security and long-term strategies for mitigating famine or drought were integral to designing projects to respond to (and potentially prevent) crises.

When given the tools to mobilise around an issue, WLOs are highly capable of designing their own solutions and improving resilience to shocks in their communities. However, and perhaps most crucially, they are able to address the root causes of hunger by planning interventions ahead of a crisis that could lead to food shortages. Their customary knowledge (as in the case of Indigenous knowledge) can inform interventions with a longer-term goal of reducing the severity of shocks.

2.3.1 GROOTS Kenya, and the Grassroots Sisterhood Foundation in Ghana

Many interventions by WLOs on food security have proven successful (Goldenberg, 2011). Examples include grassroots and WLO-led food banks established in rural communities in Kenya and Ghana as a preventive measure for leaner months. Women from these communities worked collectively to grow agricultural produce, storing surplus yields for later use at times of food shortage. These stores were used by participating families and other families most in need when a food crisis took hold. Significantly, they reduced negative impacts to their communities but also demonstrated that they have skills and experience distributing aid and identifying those who may be more marginalised and at risk.

2.4 Water, sanitation and hygiene

Women and girls disproportionately bear the burden of WASH-related issues, especially during crises. This includes the burden of fetching water for their households, period poverty and protection risks relating to accessing WASH facilities (Intersos and UNHCR, 2017; Patel et al., 2022). The humanitarian sector has tended to view WASH through the lens of infrastructure rather than social issues such as gender (MacArthur et al., 2023). However, a lack of access to sanitary products and hygiene resources (often know as period poverty) is exacerbated during crises, leading to increased risk of disease and social anxiety, which can be detrimental for mental health. The availability and positioning of WASH facilities can also have a direct impact on protection risks facing women, girls and gender-diverse people in crisis settings.

2.4.1 SIHA Network in Sudan

In Sudan, women have had to adapt to cycles of protracted, extreme violence, largely in the absence of international and national security, or an aid presence. In a 2024 study, one woman described returning to her home in Darfur, and upon seeing a lack of humanitarian aid, decided to start her own organisation. She described how other women came to her seeking help with basic WASH needs. She decided to upload a video to the SIHA Network, requesting sanitary pads for women and girls in her community. In response, SIHA sent her funds to purchase dignity kits. Her ingenuity and motivation – despite the myriad challenges she has faced – are described as having positive knock-on effects for other women around her, who drew on her leadership and adapted to their own situation through peer support and inspiration (International IDEA et al., 2024).

These informal and spontaneous initiatives demonstrate the agility and resilience of WLOs operating in extremely challenging contexts with little or no international humanitarian presence. They also demonstrate how much more effective these WLOs could be with appropriate and ongoing financial support from the formal humanitarian sector.

2.5 Shelter

WLOs are often the first to provide alternative housing or shelter as a lifeline during crises, whether for communities fleeing natural hazards or intercommunal violence, or for women and girls escaping intimate partner violence.

It is often the case that the WLOs providing aid are themselves displaced and personally affected by loss. In Gaza, for instance, Amal Syam of the Women's Affairs Center sought shelter in a classroom as she fled Israeli bombardment since October 2023, but she continued to provide humanitarian assistance to others. Although displaced multiple times herself, her work aided hundreds of women who sought basic needs such as food, water, cash assistance, and dignity kits (UN Women, 2024a).

2.5.1 Fight for Right's TEPLO Project in Ukraine

Teplo (тепло) is the Ukrainian word for 'warmth'. Since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, active hostilities have caused profound damage to infrastructure that previously allowed people to heat their homes. One WLO, Fight for Right, reported that Ukraine's electricity production capacity decreased by 61% in 2022. With average winter temperatures of –5 degrees Celsius, this puts people with disabilities at particular risk. Fight for Right founded the TEPLO Project to help heat the homes of 5,000 people. It prioritised people with complex disabilities residing in rural areas where the gas supply was scarce or completely cut off; people with disabilities and elderly people living in frontline areas; and families of children with disabilities (Fight for Right, 2022).

Largely using crowdfunding, Fight for Right reported that 2,715 'units of heat' (power banks, heaters, gas stoves, electric blankets) had been provided to people in need by December 2022. During the entirety of the winter of 2022–2023, it noted that it was able to provide heating that 'helped nearly 7,000 families endure the cold'. This included assistance with home insulation and supplying equipment, and other resources.[7]

As international agencies have given insufficient attention to addressing the needs of people with disabilities (including women, girls and gender-diverse people with disabilities, who experience overlapping gendered and ableist forms of exclusion), these efforts by organisations led by women with disabilities are filling a critical gap left by the international response.[8] (See Sub-section 4.3.1 for more on Fight for Right's efforts to address the needs of people with disabilities in Ukraine.)

7 This information was reported to crowdfunding contributors via Fight for Right's GoFundMe page: www.gofundme.com/f/help-disabled-ukrainians?modal=updates.

8 Fight for Right's own analysis of 16 international NGOs and UN agencies found that only two (UN OCHA and Mercy Corps) devoted attention to people with disabilities in their strategies for the Ukraine response beyond a mention alongside other 'vulnerable' groups (Fedorovych and Tsybenko, 2022).

3 Impact on humanitarian coordination and delivery

The terms of humanitarian coordination and delivery often do not align with WLOs and their ways of working, priorities or positioning. For example, concerns with achieving and maintaining 'access' to hard-to-reach places and groups are shaped by international actors' outsider status. However, to demonstrate how WLOs inherently add value to humanitarian action and contribute to meeting humanitarian objectives, we use these terms – which guide access; cross-sectoral, holistic and rapid responses; coordination; longer-term resilience and recovery – to highlight examples and case studies in this chapter.

WLOs reported that international agencies frequently fail to share information with them. A lack of funding for capacity building and knowledge-sharing only serves to widen coordination gaps (UN Women, 2025b). Grassroots and local WLOs respond to emergencies quickly by virtue of already being in their local communities (Adhikari, 2024; Ramirez, 2024). Yet mainstream humanitarian narratives frequently do not acknowledge their presence, early response, or key role in addressing solutions, instead emphasising the actions of international agencies (Pinnington, 2023). Thus, the work of WLOs is often invisible, especially in key humanitarian concerns such as access, working across the so-called 'triple nexus',[9] rapid response, and longer-term resilience to crises. This kind of collaboration on crisis response, whether on gender-related concerns or wider aspects of humanitarian response, can either entrench inequalities or, if provided in partnership and with appropriate space for local women's leadership, lay the foundations for greater equality in the longer term.

3.1 Access

By virtue of their position within communities, one of the strengths of WLOs is that they already have access to those who are in need. They also have a profound understanding of the problems facing their community. This level of embeddedness is essential for an effective rapid response during crises and emergencies. It has the added advantage of ensuring culturally appropriate and ecologically sound responses (Adhikari, 2024).

> 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. (ibid.: 38)

9 The concept of the 'triple nexus' is used to describe the interconnections between the humanitarian, development and peace sectors, as well as an agenda to promote better coordination and coherence across the three.

The issue of access to people in need during a crisis is a common challenge for humanitarians. It is widely accepted that people from their own communities will be more adept at identifying how to provide services – and to whom – in the most effective and efficient way. Yet, in the case of WLOs, their level of access is all too often used as a pretext to diminish their successes. WLOs and other local and national actors are often assumed (by international actors) to be unable to uphold the humanitarian principle of neutrality due to their proximity and relationship to communities – a criticism frequently levelled at all local and national actors.[10] (See Box 2 for more on how WLOs see their relationship to humanitarian principles.)

Box 2 Perspectives of WLOs on the value they bring

In a survey of 261 WLOs based in crisis settings around the world, conducted for a later stage of this research project, respondents were asked about the unique value that WLOs bring to crisis response. Notable responses include the following:

- Bridging formal and informal systems.
- Unparalleled access, not just to hard-to-reach geographies but the most marginalised groups, which are often invisible and inaccessible to outsiders.
- Monitoring and response to SEAH committed by humanitarian actors and others.
- Advocacy with authorities on the rights of marginalised groups (i.e., unlike international humanitarians, WLOs are not constrained by a principled approach and are therefore able to integrate advocacy for necessary legal reform into their wider approach).
- Prevention work, including conflict prevention, GBV prevention, norms transformation and early warning systems.
- Cultural understanding and proximity, including language proficiency, awareness, etc.
- Trust from their communities, based on their positionalities as 'local' and being women-led.
- Intersectional approach that begins organically from the stated needs and priorities of communities, rather than the predetermined categorical approaches of international actors.
- Rapid response enabled by proximity and familiarity.
- Fact-finding and documentation of crisis-related harms.

10 Many explicitly feminist organisations reject neutrality as an oversimplification and instead strive to shed light on the histories and interconnected causes that lead to crises. They argue that this approach generates a more profound analysis of vulnerabilities and, in turn, of how best to address them (Equality Fund, 2024).

3.1.1 Women Now for Development in Syria and Türkiye

In February 2023, two powerful earthquakes struck Syria and Türkiye in quick succession. Feminist organisations in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon acted quickly to begin fundraising for the communities affected. They even managed to bypass some financial regulatory restrictions and a myriad of other limitations linked to the ongoing Syrian conflict, including the right to formally register as women-led NGOs (Equality Fund, 2024: 26).

Women Now for Development (WND) responded quickly, with seven distinct elements, including a focus on dignity and agency, trauma-informed approaches, and investment in local women-led organising. An evaluation found that its response to the earthquake in Türkiye and Syria was rooted in and accountable to local communities, utilising existing networks of women's organisations in north-west Syria (WND, 2024a).

The earthquake severely disrupted the efforts of WLOs, not just in their normal operations but in caring for themselves and their communities amid efforts to rebuild. In recognition of the additional burden on WLOs, all phases of the earthquake response focused on investing in their resilience. In the first phase rollout, 77 members of WLOs who were severely impacted by the earthquake received emergency cash assistance. This meant they could stabilise and care for their teams first in the aftermath of the earthquake so that they could continue their work. Psychosocial services were made available immediately and for a year after the earthquake. By April 2024, WND partners had distributed 1,653 emergency relief kits for women and 145 infant kits to internally displaced persons (IDPs) in camps across north-west Syria that were largely inaccessible to international agencies (WND, 2024b: 17).

Beyond the earthquake, there was significant need for technical support for WLOs as they dealt with multiple crises. WND supported 15 women-led initiatives across north-west Syria with first aid and psychosocial support in the immediate aftermath. Over the following year, it also provided emergency cash assistance, grants and technical support totalling US$5,000 for each organisation. When the security situation in Idlib deteriorated in October 2023, WND pivoted again to provide emergency grants of US$3,000 to 7 of the 15 WLOs so that they could respond to displacement – again in areas where international agencies had no access.

WND's response to the earthquake contributed to shifts in attitudes towards women. Their presence in public spaces in their communities was no longer criticised as counter to local social customs. Instead, it was welcomed and even seen as necessary to uphold the social order. Only time will tell if these changes in attitude endure.

3.2 Cross-sectoral, holistic and rapid responses

As WLOs have often been established prior to the onset of a crisis, or emerge organically in response to community needs in the midst of a crisis, they rarely map neatly onto the traditional silos of international assistance. As such, they work across the 'triple nexus' of humanitarian, peacebuilding and

development support, frequently extending into human rights, climate action, political activism and other areas – see Box 2. This approach, combined with their knowledge of their local community and environment, enables WLOs to provide a rapid, context-sensitive and adaptive response. As noted in a recent paper by the Equality Fund:

> Operating within the community itself, grassroots feminists become the first to respond and are well-equipped to tackle emerging crises. This approach contrasts with the conventional image of specialized technicians operating from outside the crisis-affected community. (Equality Fund, 2024: 13)

For example, in Nepal, in the aftermath of the 2015 earthquake, at least 500 women's organisations quickly mobilised in 14 districts across the country. Prior to the earthquake, the groups had mainly focused on training and raising awareness around GBV, but they quickly shifted to address the more pressing needs of providing food and health kits, and establishing safe spaces for women. In Nepal, as with similar findings in DRC and Sudan, the actions and leadership of these groups inspired other women. Some reported being more willing to come forward to report abuses as a result (Lindley-Jones, 2018).

Similarly, grassroots WLOs responded quickly to the 2017 earthquake in Mexico, travelling to Mexico City and back to the affected areas with supplies to meet basic needs. Fearing that international action would either come too late or completely bypass hard-to-reach areas, they organised among themselves to reach remote areas such as in Oaxaca and Chiapas (Lindley-Jones, 2018: 25).

These examples illustrate how the cross-sectoral approach of many WLOs combines with their strengths in terms of access and agility, to deliver an effective, holistic and rapid response whenever a crisis occurs.

3.2.1 Vanuatu Disability Promotion and Advocacy Association, and Vanuatu Young Women for Change

Tropical Cyclone Harold caused widespread destruction in the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and Tonga in April 2020. In an interview, a member of staff from ActionAid Vanuatu noted that:

> Some of our women are dealing with six crises currently – Covid-19, drought, scarcity of [potable] water, volcanic ash, acid rain and sulphur gas as we have several active volcanoes. (Quoted in Shifting the Power Coalition, 2020: 6)

In the aftermath, ActionAid Vanuatu, the Vanuatu Disability Promotion and Advocacy Association, and Vanuatu Young Women for Change worked together to deliver a localised and women-led response (Australian Aid et al., 2021). With the support of regional and international partners and a rapid response grant provided by the Shifting the Power Coalition (a cross-regional collective of feminist organisations), they were able to conduct a localised and women-led needs assessment in the East and West Malo regions. They interviewed 167 women as part of their assessment of immediate needs. These

included: identifying key protection issues around GBV and early pregnancy for girls with disabilities; priority access to PPE; the particular impacts of food insecurity and livelihoods disruption for people with disabilities and their families; and clean water and shelter.

The results of this cross-sectoral assessment were incorporated into a larger-scale gender assessment, led by Vanuatu's Department of Women's Affairs. A key informant within the government noted that the work of the Coalition and local WLOs resulted in women taking a lead in decision-making. This helped to shape the overall support provided by government as well as by international donors (ibid.).

> The three coalition partners have been able to work together—reinforcing each other's skills, capacities and knowledge—to change the national platform and ensure more systemic consideration of women's voices and issues in disaster planning, response and implementation. (ibid.: 26)

Furthermore, the model established by this coalition of WLOs helped to inform the response of other Coalition partners to Tropical Cyclone Yasa, which hit Fiji later in 2020.

One of the strengths of the Coalition and local WLOs was that they were able to highlight the priorities of women and girls with disabilities, as well as widows (see Sub-section 4.3.2 for more detail).

3.3 Coordination

WLOs aim to be as flexible as possible in their response. This is not just an effective way to build resilience but also a key attribute that sets them apart from other development and humanitarian actors (Ravon, 2014; Black Feminist Fund, 2024). Thus, WLOs display a nimbleness and mission-driven attitude stemming from their inherent solidarity and networks with marginalised people. WLOs are efficient coordinators, able to mobilise their networks for intersectional solidarity, and able to leverage resource and support across multiple movements (Equality Fund, 2024).

3.3.1 Women for Change in South Sudan

In February 2022, Women for Change (WFC) assumed co-leadership on the GBV Working Group in Warrap State, South Sudan. Since 2016, the organisation had been working on protection, education, reproductive health, food security and livelihoods, peacebuilding, capacity strengthening, and advocacy in Central Equatoria, Warrap and Western Bahr El Ghazel States. Since assuming the co-chair role (alongside Organization of Children in Harmony), WFC has highlighted issues of GBV (including forced marriage and intimate partner violence), and the lack of priority afforded to girls' education. Yet despite WFC's leadership position, it still faced patriarchal challenges. It had to negotiate equal roles for the two co-chairs so that WFC was not left solely carrying out the day-to-day administrative tasks (Women for Change, 2022).

WFC's co-leadership of the GBV Working Group has had positive reactions, and there have been more requests from the community for WFC to carry out programming activities in Warrap State. Its success in taking a leading role on the GBV Working Group means the organisation is seen as a source of information and a connector between various actors, both in the community and at state level (ibid.).

WFC also successfully leveraged its coordination role to gain access to and hold strategic meetings with international donors. This resulted in further funding opportunities from DanChurchAid, the US Embassy in South Sudan, the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) and Trócaire, as well as endorsements to receive resources from the Global Protection Cluster's GBV Area of Responsibility.

3.3.2 Feminist Humanitarian Network

The Feminist Humanitarian Network (FHN) was founded in 2017 by a group of WLOs operating in humanitarian crisis settings, with support from ActionAid. Today, its membership is mandated to comprise at least 70% WLOs, and it currently represents 87 WLOs in 36 countries (FHN, 2024). FHN now sits on the boards of the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund, and the Women, Peace and Security and Humanitarian Action Compact. It is also a member of the IASC Gender Reference Group. FHN became an official signatory of the Grand Bargain in 2023 and now co-chairs the associated Community of Practice on Gender (ibid.).

Since its inception, FHN has raised the profile of WLOs based in crisis settings in forums such as the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and the European Humanitarian Forum. Two major government donors have introduced funding schemes directed at WLOs as a result of FHN's advocacy. With these efforts, FHN has contributed to shifting discourse around women's leadership and has made WLOs more visible within international coordination and policy spaces.[11]

3.3.3 Funding coordination pilots in Bangladesh, Puerto Rico and Uganda

Most humanitarian funding flows through international actors and down to larger national organisations before reaching smaller WLOs. This means that resources often take too long to reach people in need, which adds to the stress of time-consuming administration and bureaucracy that local organisations must grapple with to receive funding.

In 2021, Oxfam initiated pilot programmes in Bangladesh, Puerto Rico and Uganda to support locally led emergency responses (defined as immediately before or within 72 hours of onset). Designed in consultation with partners, the aim was to shift funding quickly to local responders (Manlutac and Kasumba, 2024). Local consortiums were established as part of the programme design, with a requirement that the steering committees of each should include a WLO or WRO. As a result, women

11 Information in this paragraph comes from a recent FHN members reflection meeting.

leaders helped to shape the programme design. They were able to make interventions more responsive to the needs of diverse groups, and highlighted issues such as early marriage, lack of knowledge around reproductive health, and issues facing young people (ibid.).

Each consortium was given a fund of US$50,000, plus a US$13,000 learning fund. The pilot ended up responding to six small-scale disasters that reached more than 2,400 households (500 in Bangladesh, 747 in Puerto Rico and 1,200 in Uganda). The programme also helped strengthen local platforms, as some partners within the pilot formed their own consortiums with others in their networks. The programme successfully strengthened capacity among humanitarian actors in the recipient countries (ibid.).

Including women as decision-makers and co-designers of the programme ensured that they were seen as leaders, and not just facilitators or recipients of aid. It also meant that gender issues were given due attention and priority. In Bangladesh, where the programme responded to a cyclone and flooding, women were purposely recruited as staff and volunteers to counter traditional patriarchal practices and attitudes.

Women's presence in high-level meetings and aid delivery meant they could command a certain level of dignity and respect. Their participation in programme design also meant that responses were gender-appropriate (such as separate toilets for women, safe breastfeeding areas, and distribution of sanitary and hygiene kits). This type of gender-responsive emergency assistance is often overlooked in other disaster responses (ibid.).

3.3.4 Gender and Disaster Network, and GROOTS International

Coordinated advocacy by WLOs is key to making the case for gender-responsive approaches in humanitarian action (see Box 3). Evidence from Oxfam (Ravon, 2014) and the Gender Working Group on Disaster Risk Reduction (2009) shows the important role of community-based initiatives (especially those led by women) in promoting gender-responsive approaches to disaster risk reduction (DRR), at national and international levels. They describe coordination of advocacy work conducted by the Gender and Disaster Network (GDN) and GROOTS International, networks that focus on inclusion of grassroots, local and women-led organisations in DRR and other processes. Their work has been essential to amplify messaging around the need for gender-sensitive perspectives in the humanitarian sector generally, and specifically in DRR. This includes advocating that DRR processes must engage with women's 'traditional knowledge and perceptions'. It also calls for WLOs to be 'involved in the development of national standards for the systematic collection, sharing and assessment of hazard and vulnerability data development' (Gender Working Group on Disaster Risk Reduction, 2009: 74).

Box 3 WLOs advocate for gender-responsiveness as key to principled humanitarian action

The work of WLOs on policy advocacy both generates, and is generated by, gender-responsive and context-sensitive approaches to humanitarian action. Although WLOs work across humanitarian response and are not limited to 'gender' issues, they are also strong advocates for women's leadership and gender-responsive approaches to crises. Gender is still only partly understood by international humanitarian actors, and has not been systematically integrated into policies, systems and structures. This policy advocacy is therefore vital for promoting gender-responsive approaches as a key component of principled humanitarian action. Enabling WLOs to access high-level platforms (government, international institutions and other decision-making bodies) is necessary to fulfil commitments to inclusive, equitable and participatory action.

For example, coordination of advocacy work conducted by women's groups such as GDN and GROOTS International has been essential to amplify messaging around the need for gender-responsive perspectives in the humanitarian sector and DRR (Gender Working Group on Disaster Risk Reduction, 2009; Ravon, 2014).

In Kenya, WLOs were able to directly influence government health policies once they had achieved a platform to speak for themselves:

> One WRO [women's rights organisation] reported being given an award by the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection in Kenya for its leadership and role in responding to the pandemic. As a result, the organisation was invited to speak at an international event in the United Arab Emirates on its response to the pandemic as a local organisation. WROs working in close collaboration with local governance structures or with the humanitarian system can be a useful mechanism to engender representation of women and their organisations within government and humanitarian decision-making spaces. (Njeri and Daigle, 2022: 39)

Organisations such as these play a crucial role in representing affected populations and promoting their participation in humanitarian response. They are able to amplify marginalised voices and drive changes in laws, policies and social norms (OECD, 2016, 2022; The New Humanitarian, 2024; GAPS UK, 2023; see also Chapter 4).

3.4 Longer-term resilience and recovery

Research has also shown that WLOs, as with other locally led and place-based entities, tend to design their own solutions that are not based on models brought in by outside actors. The available evidence demonstrates that in the face of crises, WLOs are able to tap into grassroots processes that have been in place for decades to improve resilience to shocks. This is rooted in their longstanding knowledge of their communities and the structural challenges they face (Ravon, 2014).

Supporting WLOs in their response to emergencies or during periods of instability is therefore a matter of facilitating effective responses for crisis-affected people at large. However, it can also contribute to advancing objectives around gender-responsive or even gender-transformative social change in the longer term (Moreno and Shaw, 2018).

3.4.1 Seven-year longitudinal study in Chile

According to a seven-year longitudinal study of the 2010 Chile earthquake and tsunami, disasters can trigger long-term changes in gender norms and relations, even breaking through historically patriarchal contexts and unequal power relations (Moreno and Shaw, 2018). These changes are driven by grassroots women's organisations whose participation in humanitarian response identifies them not just as crisis responders, but also as risk prevention actors (see also Ramirez, 2024). The authors show how WLOs were 'crucial in producing long-term changes', and how investment in these organisations helped to '[build] women's resilience both internally and externally' and 'increase their adaptive capacity to climate change and disaster' (Moreno and Shaw, 2018: 220–221). Thus, this study demonstrates that WLOs play a pivotal role in bringing about sustained, gender-responsive humanitarian action, which also has the potential to guard against right-wing populism and contribute to stable democracies that uphold women's rights over the longer term (UNICEF, n.d.).

4 Impact on inclusive, accessible and participatory humanitarian action

Although WLOs and feminist organisations are able to respond rapidly in an emergency, their work often also addresses long-standing structural issues that may contribute to (or be exacerbated by) the onset of a humanitarian crisis (Equality Fund, 2024). Being embedded in local communities means that WLOs – like other local organisations – know the structures of inequality, and can redirect humanitarian support to those most in need. In this way, they can address existing inequalities in keeping with humanitarian commitments to prioritising the most vulnerable (OECD, 2022; Feminist Alchemy, 2024). This is precisely one of the reasons why feminist organisations are efficient and effective: they recognise and address the interconnected systems of oppression a community faces, and ensure that their responses are comprehensive and inclusive (Equality Fund, 2024). This organic, bottom-up and intersectional approach is critical for more effective, participatory and inclusive humanitarian action – see Box 2 in the previous chapter.

4.1 Women refugee-led organisations

Despite a lack of well-documented evidence about WLOs led by refugees and other displaced women, it is known that in many situations they are the only organisations that can deliver a successful crisis response. For instance, in Palestine, local organisations (including WLOs) are the only humanitarian presence and often the only providers of services for GBV, SRHR and other gender-related concerns. Emerging research from Palestine shows that 56% of WLOs surveyed in Gaza and the West Bank are operating at full capacity, relying on extensive volunteer networks. Around 40% are operating at partial capacity despite cash unavailability, funding cuts, and the fact that most staff and volunteers are themselves displaced (UN Women, 2024b).

4.1.1 Supporting refugee women in Ukraine and Poland

A recent study on the role of Ukrainian women refugee-led organisations in Ukraine and Poland examines the differences in their lived experiences in each country, both as women working in WLOs and as people confronting the challenges of displacement and conflict (Jarosz and Sarnecka, 2025). In Ukraine, WLOs provide critical support to others displaced in frontline or de-occupied regions. In Poland, Ukrainian WLOs provide aid and act as points of first contact for waves of refugees who themselves are largely Ukrainian women. As with many other women's initiatives during crises, these Ukrainian WLOs in both Ukraine and Poland did not wait for international assistance to help coordinate their activities or provide relief. Instead, they mobilised for action, relying on their skills, resourcefulness and community connections to coordinate shelter, find food, and support displaced families.

Frontline refugee WLOs constantly face personal safety risks, infrastructure collapse, and uncertainty. In responding to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, women leaders emerged out of necessity. Yet in some cases, their roles are still viewed as temporary and tied to the immediate needs of the crisis rather than being a permanent shift toward inclusivity (Jarosz and Sarnecka, 2025: 59).

4.1.2 MonyQadow in Kenya

Established in 2018, MonyQadow is a refugee-led organisation that began in Dadaab, Kenya, when a group of women and girls began researching the situation of females in the refugee camp. They were able to provide rapid insights and solutions to evolving situations in the camp, including the response to Covid-19 (Chadwick and Fraser, 2023). Through its Girls First Project, MonyQadow noted an increase in teenage pregnancies during the pandemic. They responded by offering psychological support, promoting a back-to-school campaign, and providing mentorship and skills for young women to establish small businesses so that they could become more financially independent.

Other research conducted in other crisis-affected contexts has found that:

> Adolescent girl focused empowerment programmes in crises have improved girls' lives (through increased life skills, social networks and economic opportunities), and in some cases helped reduce their experiences of physical violence, early marriage, and early pregnancy. (Violence Against Women and Girls Helpdesk, 2020; Bourassa and Murphy, 2020; Murphy et al., 2019, all cited in Carter, 2021: 3)

MonyQadow operates on a minimal budget – US$10,000 per year, according to its website.[12] Yet it is now also implementing the Women Rise Project, to strengthen resilience and empowerment, as well as addressing chronic stress among women refugees in Dadaab.

4.2 Lesbian, bisexual and trans women-led organisations

Individuals and groups with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity/expression or sex characteristics (SOGIESC) are often among the most marginalised and therefore most at risk within crisis-affected societies. Programming and advocacy related to these communities often treats them as homogeneous. Yet such a singular approach demonstrates a lack of awareness and tends to overlook the substantial diversity of people's experiences and needs amongst the various identities that fall under this umbrella group. For example, lesbian, bisexual and trans (LBT) women experience additional barriers and often receive less attention than gay men (Myrttinen and Daigle, 2017; Samaraweera and Masters, 2019; Erdem et al., 2024). Organisations that are led by LBT women are therefore particularly important for reaching the most marginalised people in any society, and ensuring an inclusive and impartial humanitarian response.

12 See: https://reframe.network/rlo/MonyQadow.

4.2.1 Rella Women's Foundation in Uganda

Rella Women's Foundation is a queer feminist organisation in Uganda advancing the rights, safety and well-being of lesbian, bisexual and queer individuals, including cis women, transgender men, gender-nonconforming and intersex persons. It supports community-led solutions through programmes focused on economic empowerment, SRHR, psychosocial support, safe housing, storytelling, and leadership development.

Its flagship initiative, the Rella House of Hope, has provided transitional shelter as well as a broad range of additional services to more than 150 individuals facing violence, displacement and homelessness. It collaborates with feminist networks, grassroots collectives and regional partners to challenge exclusion and build systems rooted in care, dignity and autonomy. In an environment marked by criminalisation and systemic discrimination, Rella's work to provide safe accommodation, support recovery from trauma and GBV, and increase resilience is a critical contribution to Uganda's response to displacement and other facets of crisis response.[13]

4.2.2 Sphere in Ukraine

Sphere is a feminist, lesbian-led organisation based in Kharkiv, Ukraine. Since 2008, it has worked to build collective power, visibility and solidarity through community-led action. Its mission is to increase the influence of women and LGBTQI+ people in the Ukraine response. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Sphere identified and addressed the disproportionate impact of the war on women and LGBTQI+ people, especially those facing displacement, poverty and GBV. It provided assistance ranging from emergency housing, winterisation kits, and food and hygiene supplies, to targeted cash support.

These interventions, based on participatory needs assessments, revealed that humanitarian standards often fail to meet the specific needs of women and LGBTQI+ communities. Sphere's community-led research exposed the lack of trauma-informed responses for GBV survivors, and so it pushed for systemic change. As a result, partnerships were built with local police and prosecutors to promote more inclusive, survivor-centred protection mechanisms within the Kharkiv region.

To date, Sphere has successfully implemented more than 60 projects, 200 public actions and 6 large-scale information campaigns. These include Empowerment and Resilience Building of Women in the East of Ukraine, which delivered 115 mental health consultations with an 85% satisfaction rate over the course of 2024; and an exhibition at PrideHub (which attracted around 500 visitors), featuring 12 illustrated scarves showcasing women's wartime contributions. A second example, Inclusive Recovery for LGBTQI+ People in Kharkiv, focused on amplifying the voices of women and LGBTQI+ individuals in

13 Information drawn from personal communication with Rella Women's Foundation.

Ukraine's recovery, and providing psychosocial support and safe spaces. This project reached 150,000 people with its Women's Solidarity Week campaign, challenging gender stereotypes and highlighting women's contributions to the war effort.[14]

4.2.3 You Are Not Alone in Ukraine

You Are Not Alone is an organisation focused on assisting the LGBTQI+ community throughout Ukraine with psychological, humanitarian, material and informational support. It helps people who are more vulnerable due to gender identity or sexual orientation to survive the war. Amidst steadily increasing requests for humanitarian assistance (food, medicine, hygiene) from community members and people displaced from frontline regions, the organisation has had to contend with unstable funding streams, staff burnout and a rapidly changing context. Nonetheless, it has provided assistance to 7,000 individuals, including medicines, hygiene and other critical items, and more than 700 psychological consultations.

You Are Not Alone has also launched an online information line for LGBTQI+ people from all over Ukraine, offering a support network that functions even during airstrikes, blackouts and resource scarcity. It has also created a register of LGBTQI+-friendly psychologists and specialists.

Through its community centre in Zhytomyr (in the northwest of Ukraine) and related public events, including trainings, lectures and support groups, the organisation has helped to build trust, acceptance and visibility of the LGBTQI+ community in the city.[15]

4.3 Organisations led by women and girls with disabilities

Mainstream humanitarian action seldom connects with women and girls with disabilities. As with people with diverse SOGIESC, people with disabilities are often invisible to humanitarian responders. The diversity of their needs and experiences tends to be glossed over by approaches that treat them as a monolithic group. The gendered needs of women, girls and gender-diverse people with disabilities, and of people of all genders who have intellectual disabilities, are particularly overlooked, sometimes purely due to lack of awareness or knowledge of their needs.

Examples where disabled people's organisations, and especially those led by women and girls with disabilities, have engaged in successful humanitarian action and advocacy are therefore especially instructive.

14 Information drawn from personal communication with Sphere.

15 Information drawn from personal communication with You Are Not Alone.

4.3.1 Fight for Right in Ukraine

Founded in 2017 as an organisation focused on defending and upholding the rights of people with disabilities in Ukraine, Fight for Right pivoted its activities in response to Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 to become a humanitarian relief network. Its emergency response team of case managers advises people with disabilities, organises evacuations and provides essential assistance. The organisation runs the country's only hotline for people with disabilities; it received 18,298 requests in the first year of the invasion through the hotline and social media channels (Fight for Right, 2023). Its 2023 annual report explicitly aligns Fight for Right's work with humanitarian principles. It succeeded in reaching 10,637 people with essential assistance in the preceding 12 months (ibid.).

Fight For Right helps to evacuate people with disabilities, getting them to safety either within Ukraine or to nearby countries (including Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Poland and Slovakia). This involves providing assistance to escape dangerous settings, accompaniment en route, support with paperwork and applications, and securing shelter (both temporary and longer-term housing). The organisation supported 1,485 evacuations in the first year of the conflict, most of which were carried out by their own transport through a hub in Dnipro.

4.3.2 Vanuatu Disability Promotion and Advocacy Association

In the wake of Tropical Cyclone Harold in 2020, women with disabilities in Vanuatu were left without access to the assistive devices they needed. They also lacked access to WASH facilities to meet their immediate needs. Evacuation centres lacked accessibility and appropriate privacy for women and girls with disabilities. In addition to the needs assessment work described in Sub-section 3.2.1, the Vanuatu Disability Promotion and Advocacy Association worked with partners in the Shifting the Power Coalition to document how the cyclone and response efforts had affected women and girls with disabilities, and to advocate for their inclusion (Shifting the Power Coalition, 2020).

The Association lobbied Vanuatu's National Disaster Management Office. They wanted it to set up a sub-cluster dedicated to disabilities, and advocated for the Ministry of Health to establish disability officers at national and provincial levels. The Association also trained its own members to begin participating in provincial emergency operations cluster meetings, to keep the needs of people with disabilities high on the agenda.

A Coalition partner noted at the outset that they 'saw members being discriminated against and left behind in the rapid response'. However, following on from the Association's intervention, with support from the Coalition, they noted some practical improvements, as 'now they call people with disabilities to come first to get their supplies, before others' (ibid.: 25–26).

4.4 Other populations facing multiple forms of risk, exclusion and marginalisation

WLOs may also be better positioned to help other marginalised populations. This could be due to their geographical location, their embeddedness in communities, or their positionality relative to gender norms and other social structures in the local context. WLOs are often well placed to work with sex workers, Roma women, older women, adolescent girls, Indigenous and Dalit women, and others who experience multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination and exclusion (Myrttinen and Daigle, 2017; Erdem et al., 2024). In one example, from Vanuatu, WLOs' knowledge of the patterns of marginalisation within their own communities meant that staff involved in the cyclone disaster response knew that they needed to focus on older people and widows (Australian Aid et al., 2021).

4.4.1 Voice of Romni in Ukraine

Established in 2020 in response to the pandemic, the Association of Roma Women in Ukraine, Voice of Romni, is dedicated to improving the lives of Roma women and their families. It has continued to operate in Ukraine despite the war. It supports the Roma, who have traditionally been marginalised, providing practical support such as food aid and direct financial support. Voice of Romni also provides child-friendly spaces and youth programmes so that children and young people have opportunities to learn and develop skills. It also provides safe spaces for women and girls to meet (Serdiuk, 2023).

4.4.2 Naripokkho in Bangladesh

Since August 2017, more than one million Rohingya have fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh, a country that is highly susceptible to natural hazards and affected by political instability. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Naripokkho (an established network committed to rights-based and feminist movement-building and advocacy for sex workers' rights) mobilised its activists and volunteers to reach at-risk women and girls.

> From its own funding they provided a three-month long allowance, around 1500 BDT [Bangladeshi taka] per person, for 100 'floating' sex workers (sex workers that are not attached to brothels and change locations in their work) and rescuers from the Rana Plaza incident[16] who were in dire need. In addition, Naripokkho extended assistance to vulnerable members, providing 20,000 to 30,000 BDT according to their need. Furthermore, the WRO [women's rights organisation] extended support to middle class women-headed households with 2-3 months' worth food supply (around 10kg of rice, 2kg of pulses and cooking oil). (Babadon Sangho and FHN, 2020: 10)

16 Rana Plaza was a building housing garment factories in Savar, Bangladesh, which collapsed on 24 April 2013, killing more than 1,100 people and injuring more than 2,500. The collapse highlighted severe safety issues in the garment industry and led to global efforts to improve working conditions and safety standards.

Naripokkho showed notable agility in recognising and meeting the immediate needs of particular groups whose vulnerability was exacerbated by the overlapping forms of social exclusion they face.

4.5 Feminist and care-centred approaches

Notably, the available literature reveals that WLOs, WROs and feminist organisations ground their humanitarian response in care for individuals and communities. As well as responding to crises, they prioritise well-being, healing, and the creation of safe spaces for vulnerable groups. This goes beyond the usual parameters of humanitarian response (which are focused on a more limited understanding of humanitarian 'needs') to establish a more holistic understanding of the impact and roots of a crisis. It may also go some way towards addressing the root causes of marginalisation and supporting holistic approaches – both of which serve humanitarian commitments to longer-term resilience and cross-sectoral approaches (see Luqman, 2023). By establishing and/or protecting collective spaces, feminist approaches seek to foster collective care and alternative relationships with land, resources and communities. In this way, they lay the foundations for community resilience and sustainable interventions.

Feminist organisations also offer different interpretations of terms such as 'crisis'. As well as referring to acute events (war or natural disasters) as a crisis, they sometimes use the term to refer to the complex and interconnected systems and structures that maintain and deepen inequities and injustices. A feminist crisis response recognises that crises are not isolated events, but are ongoing challenges the impacts of which are deeply rooted in systematic inequality (Feminist Alchemy, 2024). Yet it is important to acknowledge that while we should advocate for and support feminist organisations and WLOs in their work as frontline crisis responders, care must be taken not to endanger their real work – that is, we should take care not to depoliticise women's rights and sideline grassroots activism by undermining transformative social movements (Moallin, 2024).

4.5.1 Women Now for Development in Syria

WND has set up safe spaces for women and girls in numerous locations, including in Eastern Ghouta, Daraa and north-west Syria. At these spaces, women and girls can receive education and psychosocial support while also learning about resilience and empowerment. The spaces aim to address GBV and economic marginalisation, and provide other tailored interventions that promote safety and skill-building.

A WND study conducted in Syria shows that women's safe spaces not only provide physical and emotional comfort, but also promote and act as facilitators for justice (WND, 2023). The safe spaces provide some protection, but also help participants to speak freely and develop critical dialogue about discourses on human rights violations in Syria. Participants expressed that they wanted to achieve justice for inequalities and abuses they had experienced. They believed that justice would be achieved through being able to openly challenge discriminatory social norms or abuses they may have endured (ibid.).

WND describes its efforts as follows:

> We were part of the broader context, interacting with all that was happening around us, present in life and contributing to it. From the moment the participants leave their house, then go to the centre, and finally get back home, they interact with what is happening around them. Even if a participant is there for an Arabic literacy session, she cannot but experience the shelling, face restrictions and repression from authorities, and experience the dire difficulties of life, the lack of services, and restrictions on movement, among other factors. And then women would talk to each other about these experiences and struggles, and these discussions are, at the end of the day, both feminist and political. (WND, 2023: 13)

5 Conclusion

> Local women do not just need to be consulted but they should also be consultants … They know their communities better and can provide holistic and inclusive information. (Participant quoted in Shifting the Power Coalition, 2020: 6)
>
> The weakening of women-led and women's rights organizations is not only a funding crisis, it is a crisis of accountability, equality and rights. (UN Women, 2025a: 3)

The material synthesised here on the role of WLOs in crises and response makes a cogent case for the contribution they are making to effective humanitarian action. Yet evidence is still scant, and there is a pressing need for investment in research, not just on the *what* but also the *how* WLOs are adding value and impact in humanitarian response. Traditional quantitative methods of monitoring and evaluation are failing to track and provide comprehensive data on the considerable successes of women-led initiatives. Whether the tools are irrelevant, too onerous, or not suited to capturing the impacts of their work, there needs to be a better way of measuring the impacts and achievements of WLOs.

Apart from their strengths of being embedded in their communities and operating through relationships of trust, the work of WLOs has far broader outcomes. These are proven to be beneficial and should ultimately attract further interest from donors. Amidst cutbacks and pressures on humanitarian action, it has never been more vital to promote more equitable, just and inclusive ways of working between local, grassroots and national WLOs and international actors (whether INGOs, UN agencies or bilateral government donors). This is essential to avoid replicating oppressive, duplicative and inequitable relationships that are doing harm to WLOs and the communities they live and work in. This will entail moving beyond simplistic or monolithic notions of localisation towards recognising unequal power dynamics in every setting – from crisis situations to the internal workings of international agencies – to avoid further marginalising those people who are already marginalised.

A more equitable and appropriate humanitarian system is one that provides WLOs with sufficient, high-quality funding – and that cedes the space to them to lead. Debates about the future of the humanitarian system and the 'reset' should recognise the expertise and value of WLOs, and work with them to deliver a more just and equitable system.

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Humanitarian Policy Group
ODI Global
4 Millbank
London SW1P 3JA
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7922 0300
Email: hpgadmin@odi.org
Website: odi.org/hpg