



ENHANCING WOMEN'S VOICES, LEADERSHIP, AND PARTICIPATION

Roadmap for Strengthening the Engagement of Women-led Organisations and Women's Right Organisations in Northwest Syria

December 2024



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Northwest Syria, women-led organisations (WLOs) and women's rights organisations (WROs) have been at the forefront of the humanitarian response for over 13 years, delivering lifesaving assistance to marginalised and underserved communities and disadvantaged and marginalised groups, who often remain invisible to traditional aid distribution channels. Despite numerous challenges—including safety and security risks, limited access to sustainable funding opportunities, and limited representation in decision-making bodies—WLOs and WROs have continued to uphold the principle of “leaving no one behind” through their day-to-day work. Their deep-rooted community presence and extensive on-the-ground experience have made them invaluable contributors to humanitarian efforts.

Since 2021, UNFPA's cross-border operations have engaged actively with WLOs and WROs, collaborations that have been expanded since 2024. These partnerships have showcased the essential role of WLOs and WROs in reaching women and girls experiencing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, such as persons with disabilities, older women, and widowed or divorced women. By recognising and leveraging their expertise in social justice and gender equality, these organisations have amplified systematic efforts to localise humanitarian response strategies, ensuring that aid reaches those most in need.

Furthermore, the enhanced involvement of WLOs and WROs signals a shift from the “business as usual” humanitarian model toward a more progressive, feminist, and sustainable approach—one that fosters resilience and peacebuilding. To scale up this critical partnership, UNFPA's cross-border operations in Northwest Syria have created an inclusive and safe forum where WLOs and WROs collaboratively develop key recommendations for future action.

This document showcases the challenges and opportunities that some WLOs and WROs have shared with UNFPA, based on their experience in providing gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services in the humanitarian setting in Northwest Syria (NWS). It also provides key recommendations for donors, UN organisations, and international NGOs to support greater involvement and engagement of WLOs and WROs in the humanitarian response, and for WLOs and WROs seeking to enhance their resources and leadership capabilities in order to continue playing a pivotal role.





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BACKGROUND

1. Background

1.1 PURPOSE, DEFINITIONS, AND BACKGROUND

This knowledge product aims to summarise the challenges that WLOs and WROs face when responding to humanitarian needs in NWS, based on their direct experiences. It also aims to showcase lessons learnt and promising best practices suggested by WLOs and WROs, all of which can help address their needs and enhance their capacities, leadership, and overall role as key local actors in the humanitarian response, particularly in relation to GBV and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in NWS. While this document does not claim to represent all voices and opinions expressed by WLOs and WROs, it does seek to capture the key findings validated by multiple participants through a participatory consultative process. In the last quarter of 2024, the political landscape in Syria has shifted dramatically, with a rapid increase in hostilities that led to the collapse of the Assad government on December 8. This has resulted in a change in the country's political areas of control; all references made to Northwest Syria and related coordination structures in this document refer to the geopolitical configuration before the escalation began on November 28, 2024.

UNFPA definition of local women-led organizations (WLOs): "A WLO is one whose leadership is principally made up of women, demonstrated by 50 per cent or more occupying senior leadership positions at both board and staff levels." Noting that various definitions of local women's organizations have been in use, this harmonized definition, based on the Grand Bargain definition and used by the IASC and UN Partners Portal, will facilitate the channelling of technical and financial support to local WLOs and assist the tracking of funding. It does not make a distinction whether the WLO may or may not work on women's rights issues. The focus here is on the makeup of the local WLO and provides information on female leadership. This thus constitutes a difference to **women's rights organisations (WROs)**. UNFPA's approach to supporting their capacity and engagement is similar.

As part of a global project funded by Denmark's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, UNFPA held a three-day workshop in December 2023 in Gaziantep, Türkiye, and a one-day, closed-door exchange in March 2024. These events focused on designing localised response strategies for providing SRH and GBV services to

crisis-affected populations in Northwest Syria (NWS). The first workshop gathered 50 participants, including representation from 15 women-led organisations (WLOs), while the second exchange included the participation of 22 WLO representatives. Discussions revolved around enhancing localisation efforts through greater involvement of WLOs and WROs, sharing best practices, and addressing challenges. Female participants called for a women-only session to discuss issues faced by women's activists and human rights defenders. In response, UNFPA organised a follow-up consultation addressing safety concerns, systemic funding barriers, and alignment with UNFPA's mandate, while exploring strategies to strengthen the roles of WLOs and WROs in the humanitarian response.

1.2 SYNOPSIS OF UNFPA'S ENGAGEMENT OF WOMEN-LED ORGANISATIONS IN NORTHWEST SYRIA

Beginning in 2021, UNFPA expanded its scope of work to support WLOs engaged in humanitarian efforts in NWS, leveraging their local knowledge and expertise in order to reach demographics facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, such as women with disabilities, adolescent girls, widows, and divorced women. UNFPA employed a "twinning" modality to engage local, small-scale, grassroots WLOs. This was done by forging partnerships with national NGOs and WLOs, through an approach grounded in the principles of knowledge-sharing, mentorship, and capacity building. This modality has helped WLOs overcome a major barrier: the inability to formally register their organisations and activities in Türkiye and/or NWS.



By the end of 2022, UNFPA had employed this twinning approach to partner with 20 WLOs, providing focused and enhanced support to help them expand their operational capacities and their technical knowledge of GBV programming. In line with jointly developed capacity-building plans, WLOs were provided with tailored training on topics such as GBV basics, how to deal with disclosure and provide safe and confidential referrals, gender mainstreaming, Psychological First Aid (PFA), active listening, and communication skills, among others. In 2022 and 2023, the GBV Area of Responsibility (AoR) also conducted mapping exercises of WLOs and began advocating for their inclusion in decision-making processes and access

to funding opportunities. Several initiatives have since followed, both at UNFPA and at the interagency level; these ongoing advocacy efforts have led to increased funding opportunities—primarily through the pool funds—both for joint initiatives carried out via the “twinning” approach and for direct funding of these WLOs. The success of these efforts has led to the recent decision to amplify and systemise the engagement of WLOs, via a targeted flagship initiative generously funded by the Danish Government. These efforts are geared towards ensuring a more cohesive, appropriate, and harmonised approach to meaningful partnerships with WLOs, including helping facilitate their access to consistent direct donor funding.

UNFPA's Global Approach to Localisation in Humanitarian Action

UNFPA has committed to enhancing collective localization efforts by promoting meaningful local participation, leadership, and response capacities in its humanitarian programming, as well as in its coordination role on GBV and SRH. It aims to expand its engagement with local actors, specifically with women-led organisations (WLOs) as partners and leaders in humanitarian responses, and allocate a significant proportion of direct humanitarian funding to them, as outlined in its Strategic Plan 2022-25. UNFPA strives to advance localisation commitments through a more systematic and coherent approach concentrating on five interrelated areas of engagement with local/national actors (L/NAs): partnerships, funding, participation and influence, coordination, and capacity strengthening.

These areas were developed in line with priorities set out in UNFPA's Strategic Plan 2022-25, Grand Bargain and inter-agency priorities, incorporating good practice and insights from internal consultations, completing existing guidance¹.



Partnership

Works towards meaningful and equitable partnerships with local/national actors. UNFPA plays an important role as an intermediary to transfer funds and supplies to IPs and exchange knowledge in crisis settings.



Funding

Promotes direct funding to local/national actors and predictable multi-year funding to support local responses and leadership in humanitarian action, Provides also in kind support (SRH commodities).



Participation, influence, visibility

Encourages a systematic involvement of local/national actors in UNFPAs humanitarian programs and decision making, and Inter agency programming cycle Process.



Coordination

Actively seeks to increase the participation and leadership of local/national WLOs and professional associations in coordination mechanisms, structures and processes.



Capacity strengthening and sharing

Strengthens technical and operational response capacities of L/NAs and especially WLOs, while promoting mutual learning to foster resilience, growth and continuity of services.

1. UNFPA Localisation in Humanitarian Action Guidance Note 2024 (Draft)



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SYSTEMIC BARRIERS FACED BY WOMEN-LED ORGANISATIONS IN NORTHWEST SYRIA

2. Systemic Barriers Faced by Women-led Organisations in Northwest Syria

Despite the international community's efforts to meet the Grand Bargain's commitment in NWS, systemic barriers faced by women-led organisations continue to hinder their meaningful engagement in humanitarian efforts across Northwest Syria. This includes limited access to direct and quality funding,¹ particularly for organisations led by women and other marginalised groups. At the same time, the patriarchal values deeply rooted in the context within which WLOs operate amplify the challenges that women face daily in providing services, being heard, being recognised, and being respected as "agents of change" in their specific fields of expertise. This is compounded by the consequences of 13 years of conflict, which have created chronic safety and security issues, a lack of governmental authorities providing basic services and effective legal remedies, and an ongoing economic downturn. Within this context marked by multiple and intersecting crises, the main barriers identified during the consultative process are noted below:

A. SAFETY, SECURITY CONCERNS, AND UNEQUAL SOCIAL AND CULTURAL NORMS

Women's activists and women's rights defenders have highlighted facing safety and security issues in their daily lives, which ultimately impacts their humanitarian efforts. As one participant noted, "Women's voices are not accepted, and consequences go as far as femicide." Safety and security concerns become even more challenging when women are engaged in fields such as women's rights, peacebuilding, and women's political participation, and the social stigma becomes especially challenging when women engage in sectors of the humanitarian response that are considered by the community as "non-traditional."³ The types of violence reported range from physical to psychological, and are perpetuated both offline and online. Online defamation is used to dismiss women's voices and work. Participants in the UNFPA dialogues also noted that the consequences of violence extend beyond their own persons, affecting their families' "honour" and their centres or facilities. In particular, participants spoke about the defamation of Women and Girls Safe Spaces (WGSSs), mentioning that there are still stigmas that exist surrounding these spaces, due to the topics discussed during WGSS activities. These topics and messages are perceived as a threat to traditional



and religious values and are seen to promote a "western and feminist agenda" that many men in these communities do not agree with. Corroborating this, one participant mentioned that "local authorities shared brochures inviting communities not to send women to the WGSSs. When you talk about gender, their thoughts immediately go to LGBTQI+. This is misleading for communities. In the WGSSs, we target all women and girls. Part of their [local authorities] concern is that we target only women, and we do not target all [members of] the community". Another participant added that "the community is afraid of the topics discussed in the WGSSs, because there is propaganda against them. It is often said that these subjects go against the community." Participants also noted that part of the community's resistance is linked to the fact that the creation of these spaces has led to some changes in power dynamics: "The changes that the WGSSs have brought at the community level are leading to resistance... and this is projected against the safe spaces."

B. MARGINALISATION AND SILENCING

"I have no right to speak up," said one of the female leaders at the consultation. This statement summarises the difficulties faced by women heading local organisations when it comes to expressing their opinions at the decision-making levels of the international humanitarian system, as well as at the community level. This marginalisation also clearly impacts women's recognition, which can further impede their ability to influence decision-making. Women's activists and WLO representatives noted that women's voices are still not fully recognised in

2. Quality funding is characterised as multi-year (24 months or more) and flexible nature.

3. Women's participation in the humanitarian sector is perceived as acceptable by local communities if limited at sectors such as education or protection.

public forums, and women often face undermining and dismissive comments, backlash, harassment, threats, and resistance at the community level. As one female leader noted, *"We are exposed to security risks for working on women's rights. I hope one day we will be able to make our voices heard on the ground and in the media and that we will succeed in stopping women's exploitation."* Although women are represented in some decision-making bodies of the international humanitarian architecture (e.g. Humanitarian Liaison Group, Strategic Advisory Group of the GBV Area of Responsibility, Women's Advisory Board), women who head up local organisations perceive their role as undervalued. According to some participants, the overt marginalisation of women remains strong and evident, with tangible consequences. Common tactics used by male leaders, community members, and/or humanitarian workers to undermine women's voices and discourage their participation include mocking and dismissal. Despite these challenges, women feel ready to take on more active roles in public space and to be "agents of change" in their communities. As explained by one women's activist, *"We should not be waiting for men to be on our side and collaborate, because they will not be supportive; we should be driving the change and continuing to work."*

C. LIMITED ACCESS TO SUSTAINABLE FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

Funding opportunities are not tailored to the specific needs and sizes of WLOs and WROs. Often, WLOs face barriers in bolstering their administrative and operational systems, as well as their formal accountability structures, in order to meet donor requirements. This makes them unable to pass donors' due diligence processes and to access sustainable, longer-term funding. Despite the donor community declaring its intent to increase engagement with WLOs, in line with the Grand Bargain's commitment to localisation,⁴ this has not resulted in long-term funding for WLOs. Funding opportunities remain short-term and insufficient for supporting gender-transformative work and peacebuilding efforts, or for ensuring long-term sustainability, change, and resilience. To date, WLOs have mostly worked as sub-implementing partners or by engaging in a "twinning modality" with national or international NGOs (including through UN funding), but, according to them, their value has not been fully recognised. Registration processes in Türkiye and in NWS also remain a key barrier to access funding opportunities. The lack of core institutional funding also affects the ability of WLOs to benefit from capacity development opportunities, which are pivotal to enabling them to fully unlock their

potential and support the most vulnerable groups in their communities. Additionally, WLOs feel that their organisations' existence is under threat due to this lack of sustainable resources, and their existence often relies on the voluntary work of their members. Although voluntary work brings immense value to the mission of civil society organisations, when it becomes the only modality of functioning, it ultimately exacerbates power imbalances within societies. The lack of core and institutional funding also leads to a lack of measures for ensuring the self-care and resilience of staff, which enables organisations to continue working safely and productively.

"I WAS THINKING ABOUT MY DAUGHTERS' FUTURES AND THOSE OF WOMEN IN MY COMMUNITY."

Dadal, a mother of eight children.



4. According to the Grand Bargain, humanitarian actors should provide at least 25 percent of humanitarian funding as directly as possible to local and national actors, and increase quality funding to local and national actors.



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D. LACK OF COORDINATION FORUMS AND INCLUSIVE DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

WLOs lament that there is no field-level coordination system for WLOs and WROs to share and discuss their needs, challenges, and opportunities, even though the Women Advisory Group (WAG)⁵ has been a relevant actor in bringing together women and local humanitarian workers and advising the humanitarian leadership. Additionally, to date, none of the clusters or main coordination forums in the NWS response have been co-led by WLOs.⁶ In an effort to curb this decision-making gap, the GBV AoR has selected two WLOs that are now part of the GBV AoR SAG. The lack of a field-level WLO coordination body has resulted in limited networking capabilities between organisations and reduced opportunities for these WLOs to be included in the established referral pathways developed by the clusters. And while some WLOs are represented within the Gaziantep-level coordination forums, others do not have members who are based in Türkiye or are able to cross the border from Northwest Syria. This limits the representation and influence of truly local, grassroots organisations, which would

allow them to better influence priorities and strategies, to establish connections with key actors across the humanitarian landscape, and to access technical support provided at the Gaziantep level. This further amplifies power imbalances, including within the wide and diverse community of WLOs and WROs.

E. GOING BEYOND “BEING MAPPED” AND BECOMING THE “MAPPER:”

Although a WLO mapping exercise (2023) was previously completed through a collaboration with the Gender Working Group and UNFPA (2022 and 2023), it has been noted that, to date, no mapping has been conducted under the leadership of women-led organisations themselves. This has resulted in a lack of ownership of the current mappings and a call for women leaders to produce a mapping of organisations and their needs directly—making them the “mappers” themselves, which provides a position of power in the humanitarian landscape. According to participants, to date, the mapping completed was unable to accurately reflect the scope of work undertaken by women leaders on the ground.

“WE SHOULD NOT BE WAITING FOR MEN TO BE ON OUR SIDE AND COLLABORATE, BECAUSE THEY WILL NOT BE SUPPORTIVE; WE SHOULD BE DRIVING THE CHANGE AND CONTINUING TO WORK.”

As explained by one women's activist.

5. WAG group is an independent voluntary solidarity group comprising diverse categories of women workers in the humanitarian field inside and outside Syria. Through planned advocacy efforts, the WAG aims to achieve a more effective, responsive, and sensitive response that takes into account the community's needs, and culture from the women's perspective.

6. In Somalia and South Sudan, the GBV AoR is co-led by WLOs, resulting in proven best practices that may be replicable in other contexts.

Women's Leadership in Conflict Zones: The Story of Zumuruda Safe Space

At a time when the food basket was the sole source of survival for women, Dalal Al Bashir, 42, the founder of the Zumuruda Centre in Salqin, Northwest Syria, recognised that empowering women could help them become self-sufficient.

In Zumuruda's centre, Dalal and her team are leading transformative change in Northwest Syria. They have been empowering women with the confidence and skills to support themselves through comprehensive psychosocial support, life skills training, and other recreational activities. 22,500 women have received handicraft training at the Zumuruda Centre over the past nine years. *"My greatest pride lies in seeing women become self-reliant and no longer dependent on receiving food and non-food items to survive,"* said Dalal.

Seeds of Inspiration

Realising that the food and non-food items distributed by humanitarian actors were a temporary solution, Dalal, mother of eight children, envisioned a more sustainable path to empowering women in her community. *"I was thinking about my daughters' futures and those of women in my community."*

She approached her husband with the idea of opening a centre, with the primary aim of providing women with the skills they needed to find employment and support their families.

Dalal embarked on a journey of self-improvement, determined to make a meaningful impact in her community. She enrolled in training programs for project management, strategic planning, and advocacy. *"I spent nearly two years learning how to manage a centre like this,"* she explained. Despite the challenges, she eventually began running the centre from her home, transforming her three rooms into two dedicated spaces for various activities.

Overcoming Adversity

Despite facing numerous challenges, including floods from rainwater, backlash at the community level, and difficulty finding volunteers, *"we managed to distribute 2,000 to 3,000 clothing items monthly to camps, schools, and orphans for the first 17 months, using recycled wool and large fabric pieces,"* said Shadiya Ateek, a supervisor and co-founder of the Zumuruda Centre. *"We started with one sewing machine, which*

we purchased with our savings. Over time, we have expanded our collection, adding eight machines to the centre through gradual acquisitions." This was achieved through the voluntary efforts and hard work of the trainees.

"Zumuruda Centre was like a dream come true for me," said 39-year-old Shiraz Bobagy. Ms. Bobagy joined the centre eager to learn wax casting but discovered much more than she expected. *"The centre is for women only; it is a safe space for us, giving women the courage to work and build our self-confidence."*

Acceptance at the Community Level: An Ongoing Journey

Despite the support of local community leaders, the Zumuruda Centre has faced direct threats from members of the community who have been resistant to the empowerment of women. On three separate occasions, individuals blocked access to the centre by closing the gates and obstructing the road leading to the facility.

These actions created significant disruptions, forcing Dalal and her team to move their work to her own house. *"It was disheartening, but we never gave up,"* Dalal recalled. *"With the support of our family members, we were able to keep the centre running each time, and we continue to stand strong in our mission to help women."*

A Vision for the Future

For the past three years, UNFPA has been supporting Zumuruda Centre as part of a broader initiative towards localisation and as part of a commitment to scaling up WLOs humanitarian response capacity. Women-led and grassroots organisations like Zumuruda can be powerful agents of change, promoting localisation and providing essential services to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls in the most marginalized communities. UNFPA's aim is to help strengthen these organisations and groups so that they can effectively address the needs of women and girls in humanitarian, recovery, and post-conflict situations.

Dalal and Shadiya aim to expand Zumuruda's operations by establishing branches throughout Northwest Syria, boosting job opportunities for women and fostering change. As Dalal emphasised, *"It's about women working together for the community. No one should say 'I can't.' We all can, and change begins with ourselves."*



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LESSONS LEARNED AND PROMISING PRACTICES

3. Lessons Learned and Promising Practices for Addressing and/or Overcoming Identified Barriers

Establishing spaces for open and safe consultations with WLOs and WROs has been crucial in fostering open dialogue about potential strategies for strengthening their roles and responsibilities in the NWS humanitarian response, including through lessons learnt and promising practices. The following key areas, gathered directly during the consultations, if enhanced and further explored, could significantly improve the quality of engagement with WLOs and WROs in Northwest Syria.

A. CONTEXT ANALYSIS SHOWCASING THE IMPORTANCE OF WGSSs AND WLOs

To effectively minimise security and safety risks while promoting transformative change, program strategies must be anchored in a joint risk assessment and a context-specific analysis of the patriarchal systems that perpetuate violence, stigma, and discrimination against women, where feasible. Engaging men, boys, and religious leaders is an essential strategy for preventing backlash, fostering community ownership, and promoting positive expressions of masculinities in support of gender equality. This holistic approach strengthens the impact of WGSSs and WLOs, ensuring that efforts to empower women are inclusive, sustainable, and grounded in local contexts.

B. PARTNERSHIP MODELS: HOW TO BALANCE OWNERSHIP AND EMPOWERMENT WITH ACCOUNTABILITY

The meaningful engagement of WLOs is a cornerstone of a participatory and inclusive approach to the funding ecosystem, which values the knowledge and expertise of grassroots and local organisations. This requires a shift toward more collaborative partnership models. When funding comes from a position of trust, it welcomes sharing decision-making power and includes civil society organisations in defining the priorities and funding modalities. This also requires shifting away from an approach aimed at WLO capacity building, and toward a more inclusive model that integrates capacity development and knowledge-sharing within these partnerships.



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Since 2021, UNFPA in Northwest Syria has engaged women-led organisations through a “twinning approach,” pairing them with larger-scale national NGOs. This partnership model has been pivotal in promoting a fruitful exchange of “know-how” between the NGOs and WLOs, which has translated into a wide range of capacity-building initiatives and knowledge-sharing opportunities, covering topics from programming to operations. Although participants have recognised the value of this approach and have proposed its continuation, they have also recommended creating opportunities for WLOs to directly partner with UN agencies and bilaterally with other donors.

C. SUPPORTING WLO PROGRAMMING TO REACH THE MOST MARGINALISED GROUPS

WLO contributions to change happen largely at the grassroots level, making increased technical, operational, and financial support for WLO programme interventions necessary, in order to enable them to provide critical services and gradually shift unequal social norms. Because of their deep integration within the social fabric of their communities, WLOs and WROs are uniquely positioned to reach the most marginalised groups, including people with disabilities, older women, and widowed or divorced women, who often remain invisible to traditional aid distribution channels. By recognising and upholding the role of WLOs as “experts” on social justice and gender equality, both in their respective communities and beyond, WLOs and WROs could amplify system-wide efforts of localising humanitarian response strategies in order to reach the individuals and groups most in need. Empowering WLOs and WROs would also facilitate a shift from a “business as usual” model to a more progressive and sustainable humanitarian paradigm that fosters longer-term resilience and enhances peacebuilding efforts.



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D. ENHANCING COORDINATION BETWEEN WLOs AT THE LOCAL LEVEL AND CREATING COMMON ALLIANCES TO RESIST COMMUNITY BACKLASH IN NORTHWEST SYRIA

Women's activists and women's rights defenders have emphasised the need for greater representation in local decision-making bodies, both in Türkiye and Northwest Syria. As highlighted in the Inter-Agency Minimum Standards for GBV in Emergencies Programming, *"Local women and organisations are expert 'knowers' who deeply understand the realities of women's lives, the forms violence takes in their communities, how it is perceived, and how unequal power dynamics between women and men are maintained."* Forming alliances is critical to resisting community backlash and creating a peer support system where women can safely exchange perspectives, address common challenges, and identify opportunities for collective action. As noted by one women's activist, *"Patriarchal vision is still very much there, but who is fighting against this are the WLOs."* WLOs and WROs play a critical role in shifting unequal gender norms that underpin the deeply rooted patriarchal system in which they are operating.

E. CREATING A COORDINATION GROUP OF WOMEN-LED AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANISATIONS

Linked to the above and building on best practices from other regions,⁷ there is a need to facilitate the creation of alliances between WLOs at the field level. These alliances can take the forms of consortiums, networks, or partnerships, and can help to mobilize more resources, amplify achievements, increase visibility, and enhance advocacy efforts. It is recommended to jointly establish clear Terms of Reference (ToRs) for these alliances, clarifying who will be responsible for managing the group, ensuring all participating organisations adhere to the necessary requirements, and providing oversight and monitoring of activity implementation.

"PATRIARCHAL VISION IS STILL VERY MUCH THERE, BUT WHO IS FIGHTING AGAINST THIS ARE THE WLOs."

As noted by one women's activist.

7. In 2013, during the Typhoon Haiyan humanitarian response, UNFPA facilitated the creation of a consortium composed of 7 WLOs

F. AMPLIFYING THE VOICES OF WLOs AT THE REGIONAL AND GLOBAL LEVELS

Women's activists and defenders of women's rights have called for expanded access to regional and global humanitarian platforms, such as the annual Brussels conferences on the future of Syria. This would enable them to share their insights and experiences with a wider audience, fostering a ripple effect that would help bring greater attention to both the challenges faced by women leaders and activists and the transformative impact of their work at the grassroots level. By participating in these high-level forums, WLOs and WROs would have the opportunity to bridge the gap between local realities and global decision-making, ensuring that critical yet often-overlooked issues are heard and addressed in key policy discussions. Their increased representation will also enhance the value of their expertise about the humanitarian needs in Northwest Syria, contributing to a more localised and culturally sensitive understanding of issues concerning, *inter alia*, protection and sexual and reproductive health.

G. VALUING WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO CHANGE

Women's contributions to transformative change and service provision, undertaken through women-led organisations, often remain undervalued and unremunerated or poorly remunerated. This further exacerbates and perpetuates the structural inequalities that push women into the informal economy, including casual and part-time work, and does not enable WLOs to enact change to their full potential. Thus, partnership models should recognise and uphold the role of WLOs' core staff as "experts" on matters of social justice, and should fully engage them in tailoring solutions to address GBV and SRH in their communities. Local knowledge is critical to ensuring the sustainability and success of humanitarian interventions, and its value should be duly recognised by providing concrete resources, tools, and opportunities to the women who are an integral part of this process.

H. INCREASING ACCESS TO STAFF CARE AND PROMOTING A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO SECURITY

Building upon the outcomes of the consultative process, it is important these partnerships modalities are integrated with specific gender dimensions for staff care and support, as well as security for WLOs. This includes accounting for the potential risks WLO staff may face when working in the fields of GBV; sexual and reproductive health and rights;

and women, peace, and security. Feminist activists, funders, women's leaders, and frontline workers may face safety and security threats, as well as online and offline harassment, because their activism confronts well-established power structures, which have been reinforced and exacerbated by the ongoing conflict. Additionally, partnership arrangements should ensure that organisations jointly identify and address risks along the delivery line and jointly elaborate upon concrete risk mitigation measures, which should be resourced. To this end, it is particularly important to ensure that resources are allocated in ways that promote a holistic approach to security, integrating physical and digital security with self-care and wellbeing measures; direct costs and adequate supports costs should be factored into the successful implementation of risk mitigation measures.

If members of WLOs also work as frontline GBV and health service providers for survivors of GBV, they can experience vicarious trauma as a direct effect of their empathetic engagement with trauma survivors. Vicarious trauma represents a complex dimension that requires comprehensive responses aimed at a) promoting the self-care and mental health of front-liners; b) facilitating access to specialised and targeted Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS); and c) improving access to knowledge and information for front-liners, so that they can identify and address the effects of vicarious trauma in a timely and efficient manner. It is fundamental to consider these aspects when discussing resources for WLOs.

I. HUMANITARIAN - DEVELOPMENT NEXUS

The nexus approach aims to bridge the gap between humanitarian aid and development efforts. WLOs and WROs can provide a strategic entry point for the design and implementation of programmatic interventions and can contribute meaningfully to the humanitarian-development nexus. WLOs have shown interest in broadening the scope of their interventions, both programmatically and geographically. This includes taking on greater responsibilities in terms of GBV and SRH integration—occupying a niche that is essential to the transition from a purely humanitarian response model toward more sustainable and resilient systems. Participants have emphasised the importance of expanding the knowledge and capabilities of WLOs, including engaging them in the integration of cash-based interventions within GBV case management. Upholding the principle of "leaving no one behind," WLOs also expressed a willingness to expand their reach to cover underserved areas, such as frontline areas and widows' camps. To effectively achieve that, local organisations, within existing coordination structures, would need to further rationalize coverage of services provision, in order to ensure that the population is effectively reached and services are not duplicated. This would require a well-functioning network of providers that could effectively collaborate with and create spaces for WLOs engaged in interventions with a longer-term vision.



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RECOMMENDATIONS

4. Recommendations

The key recommendations proposed by WLOs and WROs in Northwest Syria for enhancing partnerships and strengthening capacities in humanitarian responses are listed below:

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DONORS AND UN AGENCIES

- **Invest in Sustainable Funding:** Provide long-term core/institutional funding to WLOs and WROs in support of their survival and resilience. Furthermore, ensure that existing emergency response funding streams and pool funds are accessible to WLOs and WROs, fostering their integration into large-scale humanitarian efforts. Prioritise protection and gender issues in funding allocations.
- **Enhance Participation and Leadership in Humanitarian Coordination:** Advocate for WLOs and WROs to have meaningful representation in local, national, and international coordination bodies, ensuring that they have a voice in decision-making processes. Leverage existing platforms and forums to amplify their voices and contributions.
- **Ensure that Special Protection Mechanisms for Women's Human Rights Defenders are in Place:** Support the establishment of special protection mechanisms to protect the defenders of women's human rights. In life-threatening situations, this may include evacuation and relocation plans for the activist and her family.
- **Promote Resilience and Sustainability:** Prioritise medium- and large-scale projects aimed at fostering longer-term resilience and sustainability and providing job opportunities to staff working with WLOs and WROs.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR UN AGENCIES AND NGOS WITH INTERNATIONAL CAPACITIES

- **Promote Equitable Partnership Models:** In the initial phases of partnership, encourage twinning or mentoring approaches, whereby larger NGOs support WLOs and WROs in capacity-building before facilitating pathways for them to establish direct partnerships with donors and UN agencies.
- **Support Alliances and Networks among WLOs, WROs, and Experienced Volunteer Associations:** Foster the creation of alliances, including consortiums, networks, and partnerships to amplify collective achievements, mobilise resources, and address community resistance and backlash.
- **Create Direct Linkages with Donors:** Create opportunities for WLOs and WROs to connect directly with donors, enhancing their access to funding opportunities and advocacy forums.
- **Co-create Tailored Capacity-building Opportunities:** Collaborate with WLOs and WROs to identify and design capacity-building initiatives and monitoring frameworks that address their specific needs. These initiatives should enhance their technical and operational capacities while simultaneously valuing their expertise, and should aim to foster greater coordination across humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts. This should also include, *inter alia*, institutional strengthening, fundraising and programme development, leadership training, and mentorship opportunities.
- **Ensure Fair Remuneration and Resource Allocation:** Budget for WLO and WRO staff to receive adequate compensation for their work, and ensure fair allocation of direct programme costs and support costs to implement, *inter alia*, risk management mechanisms and duty of care measures. Emphasis should also be placed on ensuring that the indirect cost recovery costs in any joint project are shared between NGOs, INGOs, and WLOs/WROs.

- **Streamline Processes and Simplify Administrative Procedures:** Initiate an inter-agency and multi-stakeholder discussion on how to streamline processes, operations, and partner engagement in ways that will uphold collective commitments to localisation and advance discussions on commitments to WLOs and WROs. Simplify, to the greatest extent possible, administrative and grant processes in order to make UN funding and partnerships more accessible to WLOs and WROs. Support WLOs and WROs in meeting the requirements of the due diligence process and, if these conditions are met, support their registration on the UN Partner Portal.
- **Tackle Barriers to Funding Access:** Ensure that critical documents, such as calls for proposals, are accessible to all; this includes translating materials into Arabic and ensuring that organisations are given sufficient time to apply. WLOs, WROs, and experienced volunteer associations often do not have the administrative structures of larger NGOs, which can represent a significant barrier to accessing funding.
- **Support Volunteer Associations and Groups:** Establish partnerships and capacity-building opportunities for experienced volunteer associations and groups, in an effort to enhance service delivery across all community segments and demographics, ensuring sustainability and effectiveness in addressing diverse needs.
- **Enhance Participation in Programme Design:** Co-design programmes and interventions with WLOs in order to address local needs, ensuring that these programmes are context-specific and responsive to community-driven priorities. Meaningfully engage WLOs in defining the scope, focus, and implementation strategies of these joint projects.
- **Promote Participatory Research Initiatives:** Involve women-led organisations in research projects related to their own work and sector. Women-led organisations should be involved in strategising the scope of the research and they should be part of steering committees, enhancing their participation in both research and decision-making.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WLOs AND WROs

- **Strengthen change-making at the Community Level:** Continue to play the role of “agents of change,” both through frontline work and by fostering access to essential services designed to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls, particularly among the most marginalised groups.
- **Establish a Rapid Emergency Response Working Group or Taskforce:** Create a dedicated working group or taskforce within the existing WLO Task Force in Syria, in order to enable WLOs and WROs to coordinate their emergency response efforts, be active participants in wider-scale emergency responses, and amplify their voices in decision-making bodies.
- **Continue Contributing to Humanitarian Actions:** Work with national and international humanitarian actors to preserve the authenticity of WLOs and enhance their decision-making power, based on experience and expertise.
- **Advocate for Participatory Governance:** Continue to advocate for a shift in partnership modalities, toward more participatory and trust-based governance models that enable WLOs to co-design engagement strategies based on priorities grounded in the local context.
- **Strengthen Active Participation in Existing Coordination Mechanisms:** Continue supporting the existing WLO Task Force and participating actively in networks and consortia, in order to enhance collaboration, governance, accountability, and resource mobilisation efforts.
- **Enhanced Governance and Accountability:** Make efforts to strengthen governance and accountability measures in alignment with due diligence processes, thereby increasing access to resource mobilisation opportunities.



ENHANCING WOMEN'S VOICES, LEADERSHIP, AND PARTICIPATION

Roadmap for Strengthening the Engagement
of Women-led Organisations and Women's
Right Organisations in Northwest Syria

