

At What Cost? Women-Led Organizations, Funding Cuts, and the Price of Survival

SNAPSHOT

Acknowledgements

This report was conceptualized and authored by Devon Cone and Julianne Deitch, with substantive inputs from Ava McLaughlin Gagliardi, Sadia Kidwai, and Priyali Sur. Jeremy Konyndyk, Hardin Lang, Kellie Leeson, Manisha Thomas, Vanessa Jackson, and Xanthe Scharff provided additional review and input. Data collection and analysis was supported by Hanin Ahmed, Zainab Chamoun, Devon Cone, Diana Florez, and Priyali Sur. The report was copyedited by Diana Quick and designed by Gretchen Larsen. RI and WRC extend their sincere gratitude to all the women leaders who participated in this research.

About Refugees International

Refugees International (RI) is dedicated to creating a more welcoming world for people seeking refuge. Our experts work with partners around the world to investigate the challenges displaced people face, develop policy solutions, mobilize action, and hold the powerful to account. Refugees International believes that people experiencing displacement must be at the center of the movement to advance solutions. We are dedicated to expanding the space for refugee and local leadership in our organization, in the public square, and in the halls of power. To ensure the independence and credibility of our work, we do not accept government or UN funding. Our critical role helps us advance accountability and allows us to speak freely when others sometimes cannot. www.refugeesinternational.org

About Women's Refugee Commission

Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) improves the lives and protects the rights of women, children, youth, and other people who are often overlooked, undervalued, and underserved in humanitarian responses to displacement and crises. We work in partnership with displaced communities to research their needs, identify solutions, and advocate for gender-transformative and sustained improvement in humanitarian, development, and displacement policy and practice. Since our founding in 1989, we have been a leading expert on the needs of refugee women, children, and youth and the policies that can protect and empower them. www.womensrefugeecommission.org

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Executive Summary

At a time when humanitarian needs are reaching record levels, the global humanitarian system is confronting a profound funding crisis. Beginning in late 2024 and intensifying throughout 2025, major donor governments, particularly the United States, significantly reduced humanitarian assistance, leaving humanitarian actors struggling to meet growing demands. Women-led organizations (WLOs), despite their essential role in reaching and supporting women and girls in crisis settings, have been disproportionately affected by these cuts.

This research examines how WLOs in humanitarian settings are experiencing and responding to recent funding cuts. It explores the challenges they face, the strategies they are adopting to survive, and the implications of these adaptations for women and girls, humanitarian reform, and efforts to shift power and resources to local actors. The research draws on a literature review and 28 key informant interviews with WLO representatives in Afghanistan, Bangladesh (Cox's Bazar), Honduras, Lebanon, Sudan, and Ukraine. Interviews were conducted in May 2026 and analyzed using a participatory, inductive approach to identify common themes across contexts.

The findings reveal that funding cuts are not only creating immediate operational challenges for WLOs, but are also exposing deeper structural challenges within the humanitarian system. WLOs described being pushed into increasingly unsustainable survival strategies that rely on personal sacrifice, unpaid labor, and organizational downsizing. While these adaptations may enable short-term continuity, they come at significant cost: reduced access to services for women and girls; erosion of hard-won gains in gender equality and women's rights; loss of technical expertise and institutional memory; and weakening of community-based protection systems.

The report concludes that humanitarian reform efforts must go beyond managing scarcity and instead address longstanding imbalances in power, funding, and decision-making. Doing so will help ensure that humanitarian systems emerge from this funding crisis fairer, more sustainable, and more responsive to the communities they serve.

Recommendations

Humanitarian actors, donors, and UN agencies must:

- **Increase the percentage of direct and dedicated funding to WLOs and gender-responsive humanitarian priorities.** Donors and pooled funds should establish measurable targets for the percentage of humanitarian funding reaching WLOs, and dedicated funding envelopes for priorities such as gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and response, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and women's leadership. The Somalia Humanitarian Fund provides a useful model, having created a dedicated envelope for GBV and child protection activities. Donors, including country-based pool funds (CBPFs), should publicly report annually on funding allocated to WLOs and gender-related priorities to strengthen accountability and track progress.
- **Prioritize flexible, multi-year funding and funding for institutional capacity-strengthening for WLOs.** Out of available funding, donors should increase flexible, multi-year grants that support programming, organizational health, and overhead expenses. This allows WLOs to rapidly adapt to changing needs and priorities, implement programs with sustained impact, build and maintain institutional capacity, and maintain long-term relationships with communities.

- **Simplify requirements for WLOs to access funding.** Streamline eligibility criteria and simplify grant application, management, monitoring, and reporting processes for local WLOs—providing technical and financial support for these processes where necessary. Due diligence requirements should, where appropriate, be adapted to the size and type of organization—including community-based organizations (CBOs) and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—and due diligence passporting should be scaled up.ⁱ The Ukraine Humanitarian Fund (UHF) has successfully introduced a contextualized capacity assessment process for local organizations and created direct funding pathways for national NGOs, helping increase the share of funding allocated to WLOs from 19 percent in 2023 to 31 percent in 2024.ⁱⁱ
- **Support and increase safe and meaningful WLO participation and leadership across all levels of humanitarian coordination and decision-making spaces,** including Humanitarian Country Teams, CBPFs, cluster and sector coordination systems (beyond GBV and SRHR) and Humanitarian Needs Overview and Humanitarian Response Plans. Lessons can be learned and applied across systems from the GBV Area of Responsibility’s experience of supporting WLOs’ meaningful participation and leadership in GBV coordination.ⁱⁱⁱ Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Groups remain critical platforms for WLO coordination and for advancing gender priorities within multiple humanitarian contexts, but require sustained investment.^{iv}
- **Invest in funds and platforms that support the autonomy of WLOs to determine priorities and exercise decision-making authority over resources.** The Feminist Humanitarian Network Uganda National Platform offers an example of new models of humanitarian funding and management that enable WLO leadership, collective governance, risk-sharing, and long-term community wellbeing^v; while the First Response Fund offers an example of a global, feminist pooled fund, governed by a collective of WLOs and feminist funds.^{vi}
- **Conduct regular mapping of WLOs and engage in proactive outreach to WLOs.** Donors, including CBPFs, should engage in proactive outreach to WLOs, providing clear information on eligibility and due diligence requirements to access funding. The Syria Humanitarian Fund has demonstrated how targeted mapping of local actors, focused outreach to WLOs, and information sessions on eligibility and due diligence requirements can help expand access to humanitarian financing for organizations that might otherwise be excluded.
- **Invest in complementarity, not competition.** For the humanitarian system to remain effective and impactful for local communities, funding opportunities intended for local or national entities must limit competition from international NGOs. The new IASC Framework on Humanitarian Complementarity offers a model in which humanitarian actors can take on complementary roles to support common objectives—for example, technical expertise, logistics and coordination, or advocacy and information sharing.^{vii}

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