GBV AoR HELPDESK

Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies

Pre-Print Edition

Guidance Note on Applying Feminist Approaches to Humanitarian Action

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Key Takeaways of this Guidance Note

- This paper considers the question of whether feminist theories and principles hold the potential to help the humanitarian system better meet many of its highest priorities. Research across the world provides widespread evidence that feminism can benefit not just women and girls, but entire communities and societies. Already across the UN system, there are strong normative frameworks and rhetorical commitments to women's rights and empowerment. Feminist principles are deeply embedded in UN conventions and guidance that are key to humanitarian response.

- However, at the level of humanitarian action, these feminist principles tend to "show up" most regularly and explicitly only in specific areas: GBV prevention and response, gender mainstreaming and gender-transformative programming, and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. And yet, feminist principles are clearly linked to many broader humanitarian goals for and approaches to humanitarian action. Some of these include increased accountability to and protection of affected populations; better representation and leadership of affected populations through localization efforts; ensuring centrality of protection; working across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus; and improving data for better humanitarian response.

- Despite the strong normative frameworks and rhetorical commitments to women's rights and empowerment, and despite empirical evidence on the value of advancing feminist principles to improve action on key humanitarian priorities, the desk review and key informant interviews conducted for the preparation of this guidance note identified many challenges to feminist-informed humanitarianism. Notably, these challenges tend to link less to programmatic shortcomings, and more to systemic issues within humanitarian response that both reflect and reinforce norms and practices that undermine transformative change. In appraising the gap between feminist rhetoric and patriarchal practice in humanitarian action, some activists and thinkers have pinpointed how feminist

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principles have become somewhat stuck at the level of technical program interventions, rather than the more meaningful level of structural change.

- While there are likely as many differing views about strategies to improve the UN system to become more gender just and inclusive as there are feminisms in the world today, at minimum many feminist advocates and experts agree on the need to move beyond interventions that use feminist principles as a reference point for achieving specific programmatic objectives (e.g. equal numbers of males and females served in a program), towards tactics that focus more on feminist practice as a way for systems and structures to achieve core feminist (and humanitarian) outcomes. Feminist ways of working can serve as a reference point for "the how" of improving humanitarian systems and outcomes.

- Three areas to target change came up repeatedly during data collection conducted for this guidance note: humanitarian leadership, humanitarian coordination, and humanitarian donor engagement. To stimulate thinking and for the purposes of discussion, the paper provides examples of potentially transformative feminist actions across these three groups that are based on the desk review and feedback from key informants. Many of these examples are not new; what is perhaps new is that they are all organized under an explicitly feminist agenda.

- Developing strategies for implementing and expanding these actions within and across the three target areas is an important focus of future work to improve humanitarian response, as is cascading learning and capacity on feminist ways of working throughout the humanitarian ecosystem. However, the focus on humanitarian leadership, humanitarian coordination, and humanitarian donors in this paper should not imply that these are the only or even the most important entities for building out more feminist humanitarian response. At the heart of this work is leadership of affected communities, especially leadership that is by women, for women, and with women.

Introduction

Feminist theories and principles are foundational to understanding and addressing gender-based violence (GBV) in humanitarian settings and beyond. The terminology of "GBV" is itself derived from a feminist understanding of how gender inequality drives violence against women and girls (VAWG), and an awareness that any efforts to address violence must seek to transform fundamentally gender-unequal power structures and the overlapping systems of oppression with which they intersect.[2]

Evidence illustrates that applying feminist insight to work on GBV has had positive impacts and outcomes for reducing violence against women and girls globally.[3] Feminist approaches are central to creating societies that are more stable, less prone to violence, and more equitable in terms of women's and girls' access to essential services. More gender-equitable societies generally rank higher across a range of development outcomes.[4] On the other hand, societies that are more gender inequitable tend to be sites of internal and regional conflict and volatility. This suggests that taking up feminist-informed efforts to address GBV in humanitarian crises can be a useful strategy for promoting the overall stability of communities in recovery.

[2] The 1993 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (DEVAW) defines violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women." See https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-elimination-violence-against-women.

[3] Michau, L., Horn, J., Bank, A., Dutt, M., Zimmerman, C. (2015). *Prevention of violence against women and girls: lessons from practice.* The Lancet, Volume 385, No. 9978, p1672–1684, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(14)61797-9.

[4] This is illustrated, for example, by the World Economic Forum's annual Global Gender Gap Report. https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2024.pdf

Beyond specific efforts to address GBV, **this paper considers the question of whether feminist theories and principles hold the potential to help the humanitarian system better meet many other of its highest priorities.**[5] The paper begins with a basic primer on feminist theory—what it means, where it comes from, why it is useful, and what its core principles are. It then provides a review of some of the ways in which feminist theory is already informing humanitarian policies and approaches, to illustrate that the value of feminism, and undertaking feminist-informed action, is not a new concept in humanitarian response. The paper then considers the benefit of feminist methods in realizing some of the most pressing humanitarian thematic agendas. It moves on to explore some key barriers to foregrounding feminist principles in humanitarian action, and why implementation of the UN's many feminist-informed commitments often falls short, creating a significant gap between policies and practical action on the ground. Finally, it offers reflections about how humanitarian actors can more effectively operationalize feminist principles to improve humanitarian response efforts and provides some concrete examples of the way forward.

The paper is informed by a desk review of over 140 documents covering feminist theory and its application in humanitarian response, humanitarian reform and leadership, as well as good practices in addressing GBV and promoting women's empowerment in humanitarian settings; the bibliography of reviewed documents is included at the end of the paper. The paper also includes insights from 14 key informant interviews (KIIs) with GBV programming experts, feminist activists, scholars and thinkers, and other actors working in humanitarian coordination and funding, as well as two focus group discussions with members of global and regional women's rights organizations (WROs) and feminist networks. (See Annex 1 for KII guide). Key informants and focus group discussion participants were selected by the primary authors using purposive sampling in order to provide a broad range of qualitative insights and experiences about applying feminist principles to humanitarian programming, coordination, funding, and policy. The initial paper outline and final paper draft were reviewed and informed by four experts working variously in humanitarian action, feminist pedagogy, feminist activism and GBV globally.[6]

Even with a concerted effort to hold discussions with and access documents published by feminist thinkers, activists and programmers from around the world, it is important to note that the information presented below will simplify feminist theory and practice, as it is beyond the scope of the paper to include all the current debates in feminist theory. The purpose is not so much to make readers experts in the diversity and depth of feminist thought, but to facilitate reflection on whether it might be useful for the UN system to engage more robustly with feminist precepts and apply these more intentionally to improve humanitarian response. **This document is for anyone in the humanitarian field who is interested in exploring ideas about positive change in humanitarian systems and approaches and will hopefully serve as a reference point for further conversation and action.**

What is feminism?

Defining Feminism

bell hooks, an eminent Black feminist scholar from the United States, defines feminism as "a social, political, and cultural movement that seeks to advance the rights and status of women and to work toward gender equality and justice."[7] In general, feminist movements share a common goal of equality of the sexes, and feminist-informed work seeks to dismantle oppressive systems that marginalize and discriminate against women.[8] Feminist theory recognizes the widespread impact of gender-based discrimination in shaping nearly all societies around the globe and the resulting set of social, political, and economic structures and systems which maintain men's power and women's subjugation;

[5] See Michau et al., (2015).

[6] These are Lucy Basset, Professor of Practice and Co-Director of the Humanitarian Collaborative, Batten School of Leadership and Policy, UVA; Kirsten Gelsdorf, Professor of Practice and Co-Director of the Humanitarian Collaborative, Batten School of Leadership and Policy, UVA; Iris Nxumalo-De Smidt, COFEM Co-Coordinator: Advocacy, Learning & Movement-Building; and Joy Watson, Senior Associate at the Prevention Collaborative, policy analyst at the Human Science Research Council, and member of the coordinating committee of the Coalition of Feminists for Social Change.

[7] hooks, b. (2000). Feminism is for everybody: Passionate politics. South End Press.

[8] Han, L.C., & Heldman, C. (2018). *Women, Power, and Politics: The Fight for Gender Equality in the United States.* Oxford UP.

this is **patriarchy**.[9] The unequal status between women and men which results from and reinforces patriarchy is seen as socially-produced and changeable, although it is often deeply entrenched in the fabric of relationships, beliefs, and values which make up human culture.[10]

Feminism in History

Feminism is an evolving, dynamic, diverse and global movement that encompasses different perspectives and theories. It is impossible to pinpoint when or where feminist theory and activism originated, because feminist concerns have been captured throughout history, influenced by varied ideas linked, for example, to ancient Greek philosophical traditions, Enlightenment philosophy, Pan-Africanism, Marxism, socialism, abolitionism, anti-colonialism, civil rights, and women's rights.

Different types of feminist movements occurring in the Western world have been described by scholars as "waves" of feminism, with the first wave generally understood as emerging in the late 19th century to focus on suffrage—women's right to vote—and women's legal rights. This wave laid the foundation for a second wave, which emerged in the 1960s to address gender roles and reproductive and workplace rights. Third wave feminism built on these movements to raise further questions about who benefits from feminism (particularly who benefits from second wave feminism, which was criticized as being dominated by the priorities and perspectives of white western women). Third wave feminism underscored the importance of acknowledging and addressing the overlap of gender with other social identities such as race, class, ethnicity, religion, spatial location and sexuality to better address the experiences and struggles faced by diverse women, and to promote inclusive and comprehensive feminist movements.[11]

Understanding these waves of feminism may be useful in appreciating the variety of feminisms and their evolution in the West; however, feminism is not an exclusively or predominantly western concept. Outside of the western world, feminist movements have proliferated, some in response to political movements, such as across Asia in the early 1900s, where feminist activism on women's political rights, access to education and gender-based social reforms coincided with nationalist movement and anti-colonialism.[12] Across countries in Africa, evidence of feminist activism is long-standing—for example, the Women's Market Rebellion in Nigeria in 1929 [13]; this activism gained significant momentum in anti-colonial and independence organizing in the 20th century. Post-independence, women's activism in Africa has focused on reproductive rights, equal access and representation, and violence against women, among other core feminist concerns.[14]

The Rise of International Feminism

While transnational exchange between feminists has been an enduring element of feminist activism around the world, international feminist organizing gathered substantial speed from the mid-1970s. The first World Conference on Women was held in Mexico City in June 1975, after the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UN CSW,

[9] "Patriarchy." (n.d.). *Science Direct*, https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/patriarchy

[10] Ibid.

[11] For a brief summary of the 'waves' of Western feminism, see https://www.history.com/news/feminism-four-waves

[12] Jayawardena, K. (2016). Feminism and nationalism in the Third World. Verso Books, cited in Weldon, L., et al. (2023). Feminist waves, global activism, and gender violence regimes: Genealogy and impact of a global wave, Women's Studies International Forum, Volume 99, 102781, ISSN 0277-5395, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2023.102781 .

[13] See https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/teaching-resources-for-historians/teaching-and-learning-in-the-digital-age/through-the-lens-of-history-biafra-nigeria-the-west-and-the-world/the-colonial-and-pre-colonial-eras-in-nigeria/the-womens-market-rebellion-of-1929.

[14] See Dosekun S. (2021) African Feminisms. In: Yacob-Haliso O., Falola T. (eds) The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-3-030-28099-4_58. Also see Tamale, S. (2020). *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism*. Otawa: Dajara Press. Tamale describes the contemporary work of [African] feminism as "challenging all forms of domination, in particular as they relate to patriarchy, race, class, sexuality and global imperialism."

established in 1946) called for a conference to coincide with the UN-designated International Women's Year.[15] That conference successfully advocated to the UN General Assembly to designate 1975-1985 as the UN Decade for Women, launching global efforts to advance rights of women.

During this period, the UN established the UN Fund for Women, or UNIFEM, which in 2011 became UN Women.[16] The UN General Assembly adopted the **Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979)**, often described as an international bill of rights for women. In 1993, the **Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (DEVAW)** was adopted by the UN General Assembly as an extension of CEDAW.[17] Two years after DEVAW was adopted, the fourth, the largest, and, notably, the last (to date) World Conference on Women was held in Beijing, which resulted in the 1995 **Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action**—a historic "blueprint" for promoting global gender equality that was adopted by 189 countries.

The Platform for Action was hailed as "a turning point in the world's understanding of women's and girls' rights," which emphasized women's rights as fundamental to successful, sustainable development.[18] Addressing GBV was a key area of concern in the Platform for Action, as was women and poverty, education, health, rights, power, media, the girl child, and the environment. Of note, gender mainstreaming, which is now recognized as a core responsibility in humanitarian response, was established as a major global strategy for the promotion of gender equality in Beijing.[19] The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by UN member states in 2015, also explicitly promote gender equality in Goal 5.[20] A year later, in 2016, the World Humanitarian Summit recognized the importance of including women and girls in decision-making processes and leadership roles in humanitarian response, and specifically discussed the importance of intersectionality in gender equality efforts.[21]

Alongside and in relation to these efforts, regional agreements supporting women's rights and calling for an end to GBV have proliferated. Some of these regional agreements include: the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention),[22] the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence Against Women (Belém do Pará Convention),[23] and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol).[24] Respective monitoring bodies as well as regional and national legal and civil society mechanisms support implementation and scope of application of these regional frameworks.[25]

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[15] For a summary of world conferences on women, see https://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/intergovernmental-support/world-conferences-on-women.

[16] UN Women brought together several UN entities focused on women's rights: the Division of the Advancement of Women; the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women; and Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, and UNIFEM. See https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/2013/07/un-women-the-united-nations-entity-for-gender-equality-and-the-empowerment-of-women/

[17] See https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.21_declaration%20elimination%20vaw.pdf

[18] See https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/3/compilation-five-wins-ushered-in-by-beijing-platform-for-action

[19] See the IASC 2017 Policy on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in humanitarian action, https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2020-11/IASC%20Policy%20on%20Gender%20Equality%20and%20the%20Empowerment%20of%20Women%20and%20Girls%20in%20Humanitarian%20Action.pdf.

[20] SDG Goal 5 focuses on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. See https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/.

[21] Under the commitment to Leave No One Behind is a commitment to empower and protect women and girls. See https://agendaforhumanity.org/summit.html

[22] See https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/about-the-convention

[23] See https://www.oas.org/en/mesecvi/convention.asp

[24] See https://au.int/en/treaties/protocol-african-charter-human-and-peoples-rights-rights-women-africa

[25] Regional monitoring bodies for these frameworks and obligations include Committee of Experts of the Follow-up Mechanism to the Belém do Pará Convention (MESECVI); Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO); African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women in Africa (A SRWHR); Inter-American Commission on Human Rights Rapporteur on the Rights of Women (IA RWHR). (GREVIO); and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women in Africa (A SRWHR).

The UN has been an important coordinating body for local, national, regional and global women's rights activists and organizations to collectively advocate for women's rights. As is discussed further below, a number of UN agencies have mandates that include promoting women's rights and empowerment, and there are interagency initiatives and UN mechanisms focused on gender equality and GBV across the UN system and among Member States.

International feminist activism through the UN system and beyond, together with and in support of local, national and regional feminist activism, has contributed to advances in women's rights globally.[26] The CEDAW treaty, for example, has contributed in countries across the world to improved citizenship and inheritance rights for women, increased political participation, and adoption of laws on gender equality and violence against women.[27] Research indicates that legal barriers to women's educational, economic, social, and political participation have vastly improved around the world over the last 50 years, in part because national laws are aligning themselves more closely to international standards of equality of rights. [28] Women's access to education, health and the labor force has also significantly improved.[29]

However, the role of international institutions in advancing feminist activism globally are not devoid of critique. Concerns have been raised, for example, about the dominance of western feminism in the UN's articulation of key concerns and priorities, as well as a liberal feminist approach that seeks to integrate women more fully into existing male-dominated structures, without fundamentally transforming the structures themselves. [30] Additional critiques have emerged in relation to the effectiveness and efficiency of funding localized programming for women and girls via UN entities, for example funding GBV programming through UN Women's Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women, with the argument that funding should be disbursed directly to the Global South without multilateral intermediaries.[31]

Moreover, in recent years there has been slower progression in some gender equality measures, with regression in specific countries and regions, due to factors such as the impact of COVID-19, armed conflicts, and persistent gender-inequitable norms and attitudes.[32] In 2023, the Global Gender Gap Report argued that "tepid progress on persistently large gaps" in a number of gender equality measures "creates an urgent case for renewed and concerted action."[33] Despite improvements noted in the 2024 Global Gender Gap Report, the authors conclude that "the lack of meaningful, widespread change since the last edition effectively slows down the rate of progress to attain parity."[34] The 2024 estimated time to achieve global gender parity is 134 years, compared to 2023, when the estimate was 130 years.

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[26] Although not a focus within this paper, there are many international and national organizations and networks working to promote and implement an explicitly feminist approach to humanitarian action, and to support gender equality and the empowerment of women. Some of these are the Feminist Humanitarian Network, COFEM, Women for Women International, Equality Now, MADRE, CARE, Plan International, Oxfam, Women Deliver and Action Aid.

[27] For a brief summary, see https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/cedaw/introduction-committee.

[28] For a brief summary of this, see https://www.dni.gov/index.php/gt2040-home/gt2040-deeper-looks/future-of-womens-rights. Also see a five decade review undertaken by the World Bank, Hyland, M, Djankov, S, and Goldberg, P. *Gendered laws (English).* (2019). Policy Research working paper, no. WPS 9080 Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group. https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/514981576015899984/gendered-laws.

[29] Ibid.

[30] For further discussion, see Kabasaskal Arat, Z. (2015) Feminisms, Women's Rights and the UN: Would Achieving Gender Equality Empower Women? American Political Science Review, V 10, N 4. http://mlkrook.org/pdf/Arat_2015.pdf.

[31] Key informant interview.

[32] The Global Gender Gap Index annually benchmarks the current state and evolution of gender parity across four key dimensions (Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival, and Political Empowerment). It is the longest-standing index tracking the progress of numerous countries' efforts towards closing these gaps over time since its inception in 2006. See https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2023/

[33] World Economic Forum (June 2023). Global gender gap report, p. 4. https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf.

[34] World Economic Forum (June 2024). Global gender gap report, p 5. https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2024.pdf.

The data confirm that working towards gender equality is possible; however, it is a long-term process that requires investment in bringing feminist principles into action in a manner that is value-aligned—so that interventions reflect feminist ideals to every extent possible. This requires an understanding of the core principles of feminism, discussed in the next section.

What are some of the core principles of feminism?

Feminism today describes many types of feminism, such as liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist feminism, African feminism, decolonial feminism, Muslim feminism, eco-feminism, transnational feminism, indigenous feminism, and postmodern feminism. Each branch has its own theoretical framework and perspectives on gender, power, and social change. Despite this diversity, it is possible to identify some basic principles that are core to a wide range of feminist theory and activism. Key informants for this review repeatedly came back to some central concepts related to feminism and feminist approaches, such as:

- Adaptive, flexible, participatory
- Challenges patriarchal structures
- Inclusive and respectful
- Rooted in an understanding of (gender-based) power dynamics
- Builds relationships of trust with women-led organizations (WLOs) / feminist groups, with a long-term view
- Centers women and girls and builds partnerships as equals
- Ensure accountability and transparency
- Commitment to uphold diversity of thought and representation
- Promotes collective care
- Recognizes the structural and intersectional nature of gender inequalities

Some of the most common of these principles—especially those that may be of particular relevance to humanitarian action—are described further below. These tenets address the "what" that feminist actions hope to achieve to eradicate oppressive systems and build structures and societies that benefit all. These principles drive feminist efforts to disrupt the status quo, increase understanding of systemic injustice, inform feminist advocacy, and create lasting societal change.

- **Transforming unequal power relations between men and women.** This core principle recognizes that in the global context of patriarchy, men have more control over different levels of socially desirable resources than women and girls, and that these differentials are based on structural gender inequalities. Addressing structures of oppression and improving gender-based power inequalities are at the heart of feminist work. This includes examining, challenging, and reimagining traditional gender roles, gender binaries, and gender identities.

- **Ensuring representation and leadership of women and girls.** In the majority of societies around the world, women and girls have been excluded, marginalized, and made invisible in decision-making processes. This principle recognizes that it is essential to challenge this exclusion.[35] It calls upon governments and societies to prioritize the voices of women and girls, address their self-identified needs, and protect their fundamental human rights—including safety from violence.

[35] COFEM. (2021). Feminist leadership learning brief series. https://cofemsocialchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/COFEM_Learning-Brief-Series_Digital.pdf.

- **Promoting bodily autonomy and rights of women and girls.** Feminist theory recognizes that issues of sex, family, and reproduction—which in many societies are considered "private" matters—are in fact political. They are realms where gender discrimination and patriarchal power are reflected and reinforced. "The personal is political" is a feminist phrase popularized in second wave feminism.[36] Critical race theory[37] has enriched this idea with a more nuanced understanding of the specific ways in which sexual and reproductive rights have been denied to black, indigenous, and other women of color.[38]

- **Ensuring safety for women and girls.** A key feminist principle is the right of women and girls to live free from violence. DEVAW makes very clear the link between violence against women and girls and gender discrimination, emphasizing that the violence is "a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which has led to the domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women."[39] Gender discrimination is not only a cause of many forms of violence against women and girls but also contributes to the widespread acceptance and invisibility of such violence—so that perpetrators are not held accountable, and survivors are discouraged from speaking out and accessing support. Ensuring support for survivors and ending violence against women and girls is a central part of feminist work.

- **Taking an intersectional approach.** Intersectionality is a term first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe the unique forms of oppression faced by Black women at the intersection of gender- and race-based discrimination.[40] The term has since formed a conceptual basis for understanding how peoples' social identities can overlap, creating compounding experiences of discrimination linked to sex, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, nationality, immigration status, age, ability, and socio-economic status.[41] Intersectional feminism recognizes how gender-based discrimination and other forms of oppression women and girls experience are inter-related and mutually constitutive, which is essential to addressing GBV and gender discrimination.

- **Promoting social justice for all oppressed groups.** Feminist theory and practice seek to expose power and how it is abused. In line with an intersectional approach outlined above, it seeks to challenge and transform systemic injustices, not only in relation to gender but also in relation to broader social, economic, and political inequalities. It aims to create more equitable and just societies for all. Doing so raises awareness not only of gender-based power abuses, but of other axes of oppression. This calls for feminist solidarity with activists and other experts focused on anti-racism, disability rights, LGBTQI+ activism, and more.[42]

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[36] Rogan, F. and Budgeon, S. (August 2018). The personal is political: Assessing feminist fundamentals in the digital age, Social Sciences. 7 (8): 132. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7080132.

[37] Critical race theory focuses on the structural and systemic dimensions of racism, looking at how discrimination based on race and ethnicity is expressed in social and legal structures, not only in individual prejudices.

[38] See Ikemoto, L. C. (2018). Reproductive rights and justice: A multiple feminist theories account in Research handbook on feminist jurisprudence, UC Davis Legal Studies Research Paper. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3244865.

[39] See https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-elimination-violence-against-women.

[40] Crenshaw, K. W. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist policies. *University of Chicago Law Forum*, 139-167. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429500480-5; Crenshaw, K. W. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241-1299. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039.

[41] https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/6/explainer-intersectional-feminism-what-it-means-and-why-it-matters

[42] bell hooks is a noted proponent of this principle, arguing that "The foundation of a future feminist struggle must be solidly based on a recognition of the need to eradicate the underlying cultural basis and causes of sexism and other forms of group oppression. Without challenging and changing these philosophical structures, no feminist reforms will have a long-range impact." See https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2207&context=jiws

Is there evidence that promoting these feminist principles is beneficial to communities and societies?

Research across the world provides **widespread evidence that feminism can benefit not just women and girls, but entire communities and societies**. Some of these benefits are highlighted below:

- Numerous studies have shown a strong correlation between **gender equality and economic development**. When women and girls are given equal opportunities in education, employment, and decision-making, it positively impacts economic growth and reduces poverty. For instance, a study by McKinsey Global Institute found that gender equality in the labor force could add $28 trillion to the global GDP by 2025.[43]

- Feminist approaches can lead to improved health outcomes, **particularly in areas such as reproductive health and GBV prevention**. Ensuring access to comprehensive reproductive health services, including family planning, can reduce maternal and child mortality rates. Additionally, by addressing GBV, the physical and mental well-being of individuals and communities is enhanced.[44]

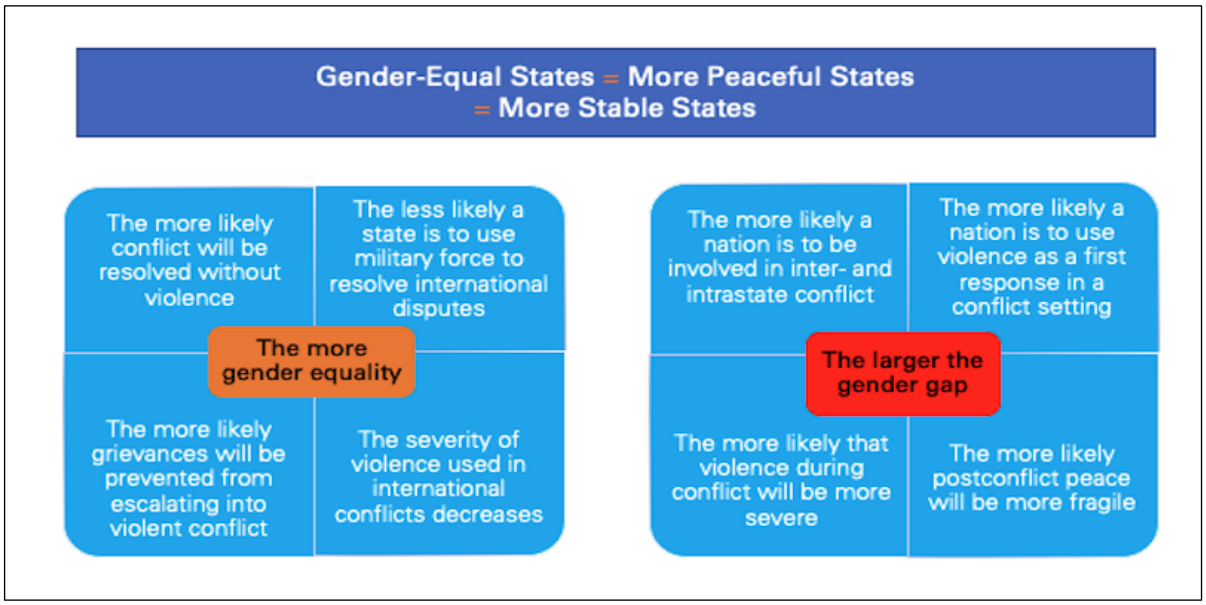
- Feminism supports **more effective political representation and policy-making**. It promotes the inclusion of diverse voices and experiences in decision-making processes. When women and diverse populations have equal representation in politics and policy-making, their needs and concerns are more likely to be adequately addressed. Research has shown that increased representation of women in political bodies leads to greater attention to social issues, more inclusive policies, and better governance.[45]

[43] See https://www.mckinsey.com/mgi/overview/in-the-news/the-economic-benefits-of-gender-parity#

[44] See, for example, Heise, L., Pitanguy, J., & Germain, A. (1994). Violence against Women: The Hidden Health Burden. World Bank Discussion Paper No. 255. https://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/abs/10.1596/0-8213-2861-4

[45] Women Political Leaders (2023). Representation Matters: Women Political Leaders. https://www.oliverwymanforum.com/content/dam/oliver-wyman/ow-forum/global-consumer-sentiment/Representation-Matters.pdf

Figure 2: Gender Equality and State Stability[46]



- Feminist movements challenge harmful societal attitudes, stereotypes, and norms that perpetuate inequality and discrimination. Societies that are more equal are more peaceful, whereas societies that are more gender inequitable are more prone to conflict and volatility.[47] **Challenging and changing gender inequality contributes to a healthier and more harmonious social fabric** (see Figure 2). Promoting feminist principles, norms and structures not only enhances the quality of life of women and girls but benefits the whole of society.

How are feminist principles already being expressed, applied and reinforced in humanitarian action?

Feminist theory informs humanitarian frameworks and action in a variety of ways. Some of the most recognizable are outlined below. Each of these areas and approaches has had some success in humanitarian operations globally, and each faces challenges, briefly noted below.

Feminist-Informed UN Conventions and Agreements

Over many decades, the UN has made significant progress in advancing women's rights, including through agreements and conventions noted above, such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and CEDAW. Examples of specific entities within the UN currently supporting implementation by Member States of UN agreements and conventions on women's rights include:

- UN Working Group on the issue of discrimination against women and girls (WGDAW)
- UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women (SRVAW)
- UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)

[46] Crespo-Sancho, C. 2017. "The Role of Gender in the Prevention of Violent Conflict." Background paper for the United Nations-World Bank Flagship Study, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*. World Bank, Washington, DC. Cited in https://blogs.worldbank.org/dev4peace/can-gender-equality-prevent-violent-conflict.

[47] See The *Lancet* commission on peaceful societies through health equity and gender equality. *The Lancet*. Published online September 6, 2023. https://www.thelancet.com/commissions/peace-health-equity-gender-equality?dgcid=tlcom_infographic_peacefulsocieties23_lancet.

In addition to Member State signatories, all UN agencies and their implementing partners are responsible for supporting the uptake of these UN resolutions, conventions, goals and agreements. Some UN agencies explicitly draw their mandates from these. As might be expected, for example, UN Women supports the implementation of CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, and other agreements and actions related to gender equality and women's empowerment. UN Women explicitly identifies as a feminist organization, embracing feminist principles and perspectives in their work.

A number of additional UN agencies also have feminist-informed frameworks at their core. UNICEF, for example, considers CEDAW to be one of the two normative frameworks (along with the Convention on the Rights of the Child) that guides its programs. UNFPA's focus on population and development is specifically informed by the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), held in Cairo in 1994, that emphasized the gender and human rights dimensions of population. In humanitarian action, UNFPA leads on sexual and reproductive health and rights and the coordination of GBV response, prevention and risk mitigation programming.[48] WHO also works on health issues, including women's health and GBV, promoting gender equitable access to health care as well as women's leadership in the health sector. UNDP leads on the implementation of the SDGs globally.

Despite the direct influence of feminist theory on the mandates of a number of UN agencies, key informants for this paper noted that it is unusual for agencies beyond UN Women to publicly embrace feminism as a foundational approach or commitment, which may hinder progress across the UN system in supporting transformational change. This and other challenges identified in key informant interviews and focus group discussions conducted for this paper are discussed in a subsequent section of the paper.

Women, Peace and Security Agenda

The United Nations Security Council has recognized the centrality of women, peace, and security (WPS) by adopting a series of thematic resolutions on the issue. The initial UN Security Council Resolution on Women Peace and Security (WPS), UNSCR 1325, was adopted in October 2000. [49] It is the first resolution to link women to the peace and security agenda and acknowledge that armed conflicts impact women and girls differently from men and boys, as well as the need for women's active and effective participation in peacemaking, including peace processes and peacebuilding. UNSCR 1325 consists of **four pillars:**

1. The role of women in conflict prevention;
2. Women's participation in peacemaking and peacebuilding;
3. The protection of women's rights during and after conflict; and
4. Women's specific needs during repatriation, resettlement, rehabilitation, reintegration and post-conflict reconstruction.

Following UNSCR 1325, the Security Council has adopted nine additional resolutions on WPS. These resolutions are often referred to as belonging to two categories. **The first group of resolutions promotes women's active and effective participation in peacemaking and peacebuilding**: UNSCR 1325 (2000); UNSCR 1889 (2013); UNSCR 2122 (2013); UNSCR 2242 (2015); and UNSCR 2493 (2019). **The second group, beginning with the adoption of UNSCR 1820 in 2008, aims to prevent and address conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV):** UNSCR 1820 (2008); UNSCR 1888 (2009); UNSCR 1960 (2010); UNSCE 2106 (2013); and UNSCR 2467 (2019).[50]

The WPS agenda aims to address the disproportionate impact of conflict on women and girls, promote gender equality in decision-making processes related to peace and security, and enhance the protection of women's rights in conflict

[48] See UNFPA's mandate: https://www.unfpa.org/frequently-asked-questions#:~:text=The%20mandate%20of%20UNFPA%2C%20as,developing%20countries%20of%20population%20problems.
[49] United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (2000): https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n00/720/18/pdf/n0072018.pdf?token=qpeOp42o2LeyEEbrR4&fe=true.
[50] See https://www.peacewomen.org/security-council/WPS-in-SC-Council.

and post-conflict settings. By recognizing women as agents of change and peace, the WPS agenda seeks to foster more inclusive and sustainable peace processes that benefit all members of society. A 2015 study on the implementation of WPS found that women's participation in the peace-building process increased the likelihood that a peace agreement would last at least two years by 20 percent, and increased the probability it would last 15 years by 35 percent. [51] However, this same study found that implementation of the WPS remained challenging, noting the "struggle to bridge the declared intent of international policymaking and the reality of domestic action in the many corners of the world where resolution 1325 is most needed."[52] A subsequent analysis of the WPS agenda found "a drastic gap between international donor rhetoric and funding," contributing to challenges in the uptake of WPS action plans at the country level.[53]

Feminist Foreign Policies

Feminist foreign policy is one of the more recent developments in the history of feminist approaches to humanitarian action. These policies build on the WPS agenda and seek to integrate feminist ideals across a range of foreign policy issues, including demilitarization, climate change, labor rights, and foreign aid.[54] As of March 2024, according to UN Women, feminist foreign policies have been adopted by Sweden (2014, and withdrawn by a new government in 2022), Canada (2017), France (2019), Mexico (2020), Spain (2021), Luxembourg (2021), Germany (2021), Netherlands (2021) Chile (2023), Slovenia (2023), and Colombia (2024).[55] These have influenced governments to prioritize the rights and needs of women and girls in humanitarian settings through initiatives aimed at women's empowerment, safety and well-being.[56]

The European Union has adopted a Gender Action Plan for its external relations, which includes humanitarian aid and crisis response for activities that are gender-responsive, support women's empowerment initiatives, and address GBV in emergency contexts.[57] Some countries also have gender strategies for humanitarian response, such as Germany's Gender Strategy for Foreign Policy Crisis Engagement.[58] While these policies and plans have raised awareness about the relevance of feminist theory in foreign policy and international aid, including humanitarian assistance, critics note they may fall short of outlining a clear and compelling vision for feminist humanitarian aid. Moreover, they may not always translate into improved financing for programs supporting the rights and needs of women and girls. This is

[51] UN Women (2015). Preventing conflict, transforming justice, securing the peace: A global study on the implementation of SCR 1325. https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/globalstudywps_en_web.pdf.

[52] Ibid, p 5.

[53] Davies, S. & Ture, T. (March 2022). Follow the money: Assessing Women, Peace, and Security through financing for gender-inclusive peace. *Review of International Studies*, 48(4):1-21. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/359532629_Follow_the_money_Assessing_Women_Peace_and_Security_through_financing_for_gender-inclusive_peace.

[54] Feminist Foreign Policy Collaborative and ICRW. (2023). "Feminist foreign policy index: Government accountability in a digital era." Parallel Event during the NGO Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) Forum.

[55] Papworth, E (March 2024). Advancing Feminist Foreign Policy in the multilateral system: Key debates and challenges. International Peace Institute. https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/2403_Advancing-Feminist-Foreign-Policyweb.pdf. See also UN Women. (2022). Feminist foreign policies: An introduction. https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/Brief-Feminist-foreign-policies-en_0.pdf.

[56] For a quantitative evaluation of feminist commitments in foreign policy, see https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/FFP-Index.pdf.

[57] See discussions of the limitations of feminist foreign policy: Walfridsson, H. (2022). Sweden's new government abandons feminist foreign policy. *Human Rights Watch.* https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/31/swedens-new-government-abandons-feminist-foreign-policy; Aggestam, K. & Bergman-Rosamond, A. (2016). Swedish feminist foreign policy in the making: Ethics, politics, and gender. *Ethics & International Affairs, 30*(3), 323-334. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679416000241; Mazurana, D. (2016). Sweden's feminist foreign policy: Implications for humanitarian response. http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.4782.0565; Starr, L. & Mitchell, C. (2018). How can Canada's feminist international assistance policy support a feminist agenda in Africa? Challenges in addressing sexual violence in four agricultural colleges in Ethiopia, *Agenda, 32*(1), 107-118. https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2018.1427692.

[58] See https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blueprint/servlet/blob/2647924/ad2d6af354b4228502fbe34fbdebc9f9/genderstrategie-krise-data.pdf

exemplified in funding to humanitarian GBV programs. A 2022 mid-year report from the global Protection Cluster highlighted that GBV is one of the most underfunded areas within the Protection Cluster.[59]

Gender Mainstreaming in Humanitarian Policies, Coordination and Programming

As noted above, gender mainstreaming emerged in the fourth World Conference on Women as a key strategy for promoting gender equality and women's empowerment globally. Specific efforts to integrate gender equality in humanitarian action through gender mainstreaming include the establishment of the IASC Gender Reference Group and the Gender in Humanitarian Action groups at the global and national levels, [60] the GenCap project,[61] and the development of the Gender Marker.[62] In early 2012, the United Nations agreed on the landmark UN System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, or UN-SWAP, to implement the gender equality policy of its highest executive body, the UN Chief Executives Board, chaired by the Secretary-General. Spearheaded by UN Women, the UN-SWAP for the first time assigned common performance standards for the gender-related work of all UN entities, ensuring greater coherence and accountability.[63]

In 2017, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) endorsed a gender equality policy which stated, "The IASC commits to the goals of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in humanitarian action."[64] This policy was updated by UN Women and the UN Gender Reference Group in 2024. The 2024 policy promotes "a people-centered, feminist and intersectional vision of equality and inclusion in humanitarian action as essential to understanding and addressing different people's experiences of humanitarian crises."[65] UN Women, OCHA, UNFPA, UNICEF and UNHCR also have specific mandates and agency-specific strategies to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in their humanitarian programming.

A 2020 Inter-agency Humanitarian Evaluation on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls cited achievements in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, finding that as a result of work on **gender mainstreaming**, humanitarian actors:

- more systematically consulted women and girls;
- improved the collection and reporting of sex- and age-disaggregated data;
- made some progress in accounting for the needs of multiple populations and the specific needs of women and girls in needs assessment;
- have undertaken more nuanced analyses of gender-related gaps, inequalities and contextual factors in Humanitarian Response Plans. [66]

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[59] See https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/gpc_protection_funding_mid-year-review_2022.pdf

[60] For more information about the Gender Reference Group, see https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-reference-group-on-gender-and-humanitarian-action At the country level, Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Groups (GiHAs) may exist to support gender mainstreaming and gender equality.

[61] See https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/gender-standby-capacity-project-gencap.

[62] See https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/other/content/iasc-gender-age-marker-gam-2018. Also see www.iascgenderwithagemarker.com.

[63] See https://unsdg.un.org/resources/un-system-wide-action-plan-gender-equality-and-empowerment-women.

[64] IASC (November 2017). Policy on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in humanitarian action, p 1: https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2020-11/IASC%20Policy%20on%20Gender%20Equality%20and%20the%20Empowerment%20of%20Women%20and%20Girls%20in%20Humanitarian%20Action.pdf.

[65] IASC (January 2024). Policy on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in humanitarian action, p 2: https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/IASC%20Policy%20on%20Gender%20Equality%20and%20the%20Empowerment%20of%20Women%20and%20Girls%20in%20Humanitarian%20Action.pdf.

[66] IASC (2020). The Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls. https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/inter-agency-humanitarian-evaluations/inter-agency-humanitarian-evaluation-iahe-gender-equality-and-empowerment-women-and-girls-geewg

However, the evaluation noted significant challenges. Many of the evaluation recommendations focus on improved engagement of humanitarian leadership, increased accountability, greater participation of women and girls, better monitoring and evaluation, and increased funding. A subsequent independent review of the UN's staffing, resources and architecture on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, undertaken in 2022, found similar gaps between commitments and action, highlighting inconsistent leadership, the patriarchal environment of the UN, and a failure to take transformative action as major impediments to progress.[67]

In response, the UN Secretary-General has released a new **UN system-wide Gender Equality Acceleration Plan.**[68] The Acceleration Plan comprises five areas: speaking out on gender equality; gender transformative leadership; accountability for gender equality results; resourcing and taking an action-oriented approach. Twelve UN entities, including OCHA, UN WOMEN, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNDP, UNHCR, OHCHR, DPO and DPPA, were engaged in a Director-level Task Team to develop the Acceleration Plan, and will continue to oversee the implementation. The UN Secretary General has convened the first global Gender Steering Group with UN principals to oversee the implementation of the Acceleration Plan.

Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies (GBViE)

Addressing gender-based violence (GBV) in emergencies was formally recognized as a core area for action within the 2005 Humanitarian Reform Agenda and resulted in the establishment of the Gender-based Violence Area of Responsibility (GBV AoR) within the cluster system. The GBV AoR is the main coordinating body for addressing GBV in humanitarian action and is led by UNFPA. The AoR and its members have produced wide-ranging guidance on how best to address GBV in humanitarian settings. Feminist theory and practice are integral to this guidance, and to all GBV programming.

At the most fundamental level, many of the tenets of GBV response programs are drawn from feminist principles, such as situating the survivor's reactions within a broader social environment of gender-based discrimination (rather than applying a western-informed medical model which looks at patient needs and issues in terms of individual pathology).[69] The commitment to a survivor-centered approach in GBV response requires that service providers treat survivors with dignity and respect their self-identified needs.

In addition, GBV coordination and programming are strongly linked to feminist principles of accountability, representation, inclusion and intersectionality. The humanitarian GBV community also has decades of experience working to advocate for gender-transformative approaches in humanitarian aid that address the fundamental gender-power imbalances that lead to violence against women and girls. In one example, the GBV AoR supported the development of the IASC-endorsed *Guidelines on Integrating Gender-based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action* (2015), a core reference on GBV risk mitigation across all sectors of humanitarian response (commonly referred to as the IASC GBV Guidelines).[70] These guidelines lay out specific actions every sector can take to reduce GBV and to promote rights, leadership, and participation of women and girls in sector program assessments, design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. Based on the successes of GBV risk mitigation in their work, some

[67] Executive Office of the Secretary General (2023). Independent Review of the UN System's Capacity to Deliver on Gender Equality. https://www.passblue.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/2023.02.11-UN-Systems-Review-on-Gender-Equality-vFinalSG-1.pdf

[68] Publication pending. For more information, see https://press.un.org/en/2024/dsgsm1895.doc.htm

[69] For more information about this subject, see Ward, J. (2020). Feminist Approaches to Specialized Mental Health Care for Survivors of GBV. GBV AoR Helpdesk, https://gbvaor.net/sites/default/files/2020-06/Learning%20Brief%20-%20Feminist%20Approaches%20to%20Mental%20Health%20Care%20for%20GBV%20Survivors%20-%2029.05.2020.pdf. Also see Horn, J. (2020). Decolonising emotional well-being and mental health in development: African feminist innovations, Gender & Development, 28:1, 85-98. https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2020.1717177.

[70] For access to the GBV Guidelines and associated tools, see https://gbvguidelines.org/en/

sectors have elaborated their own GBV-related policies and guidance.[71]

Despite the centrality of GBV prevention, response and risk mitigation to humanitarian action,[72] a UNFPA-led review of the GBV AoR in 2022 reported funding to GBV work still makes up only a small percentage of total humanitarian funding and is less funded compared to other sectors. In 2021, the overall Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO) was 53 percent funded while GBV received only 28.5 percent of required funds; in 2022, the GHO was 57.6 percent funded but GBV received only 20 percent of required funds.[73]

How are feminist principles relevant to key humanitarian thematic agendas?

As illustrated above, feminist principles are deeply embedded in the normative frameworks, conventions, and guidance that are key to the humanitarian system. However, at the level of humanitarian action, these feminist principles tend to "show up" most regularly and explicitly only in specific areas: GBV prevention and response, gender mainstreaming and gender-transformative programming, and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. And yet, feminist principles are clearly linked to many broader humanitarian goals for and approaches to humanitarian action. Some of these include increased accountability to and protection of affected populations; better representation and leadership of affected populations through localization efforts; ensuring centrality of protection; working across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus; and improving data for better humanitarian response.

Notably, and despite major reform efforts—such as the Humanitarian Reform Agenda (2005), the Transformative Agenda (2011), and the World Humanitarian Summit (2016)—the humanitarian community continues to struggle with realizing these goals and approaches. This invites the question of whether a more explicitly feminist approach across these key areas might result in greater success. The linkages to and potential contributions of feminist principles to key humanitarian agendas are discussed below, with some examples of good practices in relation to these agendas drawn from GBV and gender equality work in humanitarian settings.

Promoting Accountability to Affected Populations

As part of the Transformative Agenda, the IASC seeks to uphold accountability to affected people (AAP) in relation to **five core commitments**: leadership, transparency, feedback and complaints, participation, and monitoring and evaluation.[74] These commitments require that humanitarian actors:

1. *Take account* by providing community members with meaningful influence in decision-making.
2. *Give account* by through effective and transparent sharing of information.
3. *Be held to account* by ensuring that communities have the chance to evaluate, alter, and, where necessary, sanction the actions of humanitarian actors. [75]

[71] For example, the WASH cluster has articulated this in its Five Minimum Commitments and accompanying Safety and Accessibility Toolkit. See https://gbvguidelines.org/document/wash-minimum-commitments-to-safety-and-dignity-framework-and-tools/

[72] GBV is recognized as one of four mandatory responsibilities for Humanitarian Country Teams [HCTs] in all cluster responses. See IASC. (2017). Standard terms of reference for Humanitarian Country Teams. https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/hct_tors.pdf.

[73] Data from the OCHA FTS website, https://fts.unocha.org/home/2024/donors/view Data on funding gaps is not available prior to 2020 because the breakdown of financial requirements by Protection AoRs, including GBV, was not included in response plans. Cited in Ward, J, Tong, K, and Voss, J. (2023). Gender-based Violence Area of Responsibility External Review. https://gbvaor.net/sites/default/files/2024-05/GBV%20AoR%20Report_FINAL%20%283%29.pdf

[74] IASC. (2016). What is accountability to affected populations? https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2015-12/iasc_aap_psea_2_pager_for_hc.pdf.

[75] Ibid.

Such measures align closely with feminist commitments to transform unequal power relations and prioritize local knowledge, agency, and leadership. They require that humanitarian actors act in ways which enable authentic participation, humility, and transparency. Yet, multiple global reviews and evaluations have noted the persistent gap between the goals of AAP and the impact of current reform efforts.[76] In a 2021 report *Accountability to Affected People: Stuck in the Weeds*, researchers from the Humanitarian Advisory Group write that,

> *The 'logic of humanitarian relief' inhibits the strengthening of accountability to affected people. What agencies specialize in affects their interpretation of priorities and limits the extent to which they are able to act on advice about needs and preferences.*[77]

While humanitarian agencies overwhelmingly view themselves as "values-based," day-to-day decision-making can quickly become technocratic and removed from these ideals, to the exclusion of the voices of affected people. **A feminist perspective challenges this separation between overarching goals and day-to-day implementation, providing a set of principles which are equally applicable to everything from institutional hierarchies to program implementation.**

Perhaps most notably, a feminist approach can play a significant role in shaping the approach to AAP by identifying and supporting attention to and leadership of women and girls. As noted previously, GBV programming is one example where this feminist-informed engagement is happening regularly. Consultations with women and girls are systematic in program assessments and monitoring and evaluation. As well, GBV programming focuses not only on meeting the immediate needs of those most affected, but also on promoting the rights and long-term empowerment of diverse women and girls at every stage of humanitarian intervention. In this way, GBV programming may have useful lessons learned and good practices relevant to the broader goals of AAP.[78]

Enhancing Localization

Localization can be defined as "a process of recognizing, respecting and strengthening the leadership by local authorities and the capacity of local civil society in humanitarian action, in order to better address the needs of affected populations and to prepare national actors for future humanitarian responses."[79] Like AAP, localization has received greater attention within the humanitarian community in recent years and has drawn commitments from nearly all major humanitarian donors, UN agencies, and international NGOs. Most notably, the Grand Bargain agreement, which emerged from the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, committed to a global, aggregate target of 25 percent of all funding to local and national actors by 2020.[80] However, according to the 2023 Global Humanitarian Assistance Report, only 1.2 percent of international humanitarian funding went directly to local and national actors in 2022.[81] Recent critiques of localization indicate there is still significant improvement necessary across all areas of humanitarian response, particularly in terms of hierarchies of power, equitable partnerships, direct funding, and inclusion and leadership.[82]

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[76] Humanitarian Advisory Group. (2021). Accountability to affected people: Stuck in the weeds. *Humanitarian horizons practice paper series.* https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/HH_Practice-Paper-8_AAP_draft7.pdf.

[77] Ibid.

[78] For further discussion of this, see Ward, J. (2024). Briefing Note: GBV Risk Mitigation: An Essential Approach to Meeting Core Humanitarian Priorities, GBV AoR Helpdesk. https://www.sddirect.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-04/GBV%20AoR%20HD%2024%20-%20GBV%20Risk%20Mitigation%20final%20V1.pdf

[79] Roepstorff, K. (2020) A call for critical reflection on the localisation agenda in humanitarian action, *Third World Quarterly, 41*(2), 284-301, DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2019.1644160.

[80] IASC. The Grand Bargain. https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain.

[81] Global Humanitarian Assistance Report (2023). Chapter 3: A better humanitarian system: locally-led action. https://devinit.org/resources/global-humanitarian-assistance-report-2023/a-better-humanitarian-system-locally-led-action/.

[82] Robillard, S., Atim, T., Maxwell, D. (2021). Localization: A Landscape Report. USAID and Tufts. https://fic.tufts.edu/publication-item/localization-a-landscape-report/

A commitment to transforming unequal power relations and prioritizing local knowledge, agency, and leadership is critical to the success of localization. While there are many compelling arguments for localization, there are important differences between a case for localization as a means to achieve other goals and priorities and a specifically feminist case for localization as a worthy goal unto itself. For example, when humanitarian actors make arguments in favor of localization on the grounds that local and national actors have greater access to affected populations or have more accurate knowledge of their communities, they may still presume that localization is a "nice to have" rather than a "need to have." Instead, **a feminist perspective reinforces the commitment expressed by the IASC to make humanitarian response "as local as possible and as international as necessary**."[83]

Feminist approaches call for attention to inequalities that drive discrimination and exclusion experienced by women and girls, and seek to transform power relations, giving women and girls greater voice and direct participation in decision-making processes. A feminist approach also informs how localization is best achieved: by working *with* local organizations and individuals, rather than *for* them. This includes inviting their leadership of humanitarian response strategies, letting women and girls shape priorities for action. Perhaps not surprisingly, the GBV community is recognized by many in the humanitarian community as a leader in localization practices. A recent review of the GBV AoR commissioned by UNFPA concluded that,

> *Localization is a strong aspect of GBV sub-clusters. GBV sub-clusters are, quite universally, perceived to be leading examples of localization across the cluster system. However, there is still need for significant improvement in empowering local actors to sustainably lead on GBV coordination and programming.*[84]

The 2021-2025 Call to Action Roadmap has a commitment to WLO leadership in coordination, including specific goals of UNFPA and the GBV AoR to increase the number of WLOs taking leadership roles in coordination, and also commitments to advocate for the value of WLO co-coordination across sectors other than GBV.[85] As with AAP, there may be useful lessons learned and good practices on localization in GBV work that can apply to the broader humanitarian community to improve localization efforts.

Box 1. Representation of Women and Girls in Humanitarian Coordination.

In the context of humanitarian decision-making, research by GBV AoR partners indicates the **engagement of WLOs in GBV coordination roles has a noticeable impact at an individual, organizational, and sector level in supporting more efficient service delivery and access**. Women-led organizations bring diverse perspectives to coordination groups, fostering a more supportive and inclusive environment, resulting in better outcomes for all stakeholders. They prioritize inclusivity, bring in context-specific knowledge and community networks to address gender-specific needs effectively.

See Trocaire et al (2023). Women-led organizations: Leadership in GBV coordination resource package. https://www.trocaire.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/WLO-Leadership-in-GBV-Coordination-Resource-Package-1.pdf?type=policy.

[83] IASC. (n.d.). *IASC guidance on strengthening participation, representation and leadership of local and national actors in IASC humanitarian coordination mechanisms*. https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/operational-response/iasc-guidance-strengthening-participation-representation-and-leadership-local-and-national-actors.

[84] Ward, J, Tong, K, and Voss, J. (2023). Gender-based Violence Area of Responsibility External Review. https://gbvaor.net/sites/default/files/2024-05/GBV%20AoR%20Report_FINAL%20%283%29.pdf

[85] The Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies is a global initiative of governments and donors, international organisations (IOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Its aim is to drive change and foster accountability from the humanitarian system to address GBV from the earliest phases of a crisis. See https://www.calltoactiongbv.com/what-we-do.

Additional good practices related to leadership and involvement of women and WROs/WLOs across humanitarian sectors are evidenced in GBV risk mitigation efforts; examples include supporting WROs/WLOs to: lead sector safety audits; advocate within and across humanitarian response systems for their needs and rights; engage as co-partners in GBV risk mitigation programming efforts and monitoring; and facilitate and/or co-facilitate training and other capacity building linked to GBV risk mitigation. Based on the success of this work, some humanitarian sectors have created guidance that emphasizes the importance of promoting the leadership and engagement of women and girls, in line with core principles of GBV risk mitigation.[86]

Ensuring Centrality of Protection

Regarding the concept of the centrality of protection, the IASC principals state:

> *Protection of all persons affected and at risk must inform humanitarian decision-making and response, including engagement with States and non-State parties to conflict. It must be central to our preparedness efforts, as part of immediate and life-saving activities, and throughout the duration of humanitarian response and beyond.*[87]

This basic commitment is at the core of the centrality of protection, which seeks to reframe protection as a system-wide responsibility rather than solely as a sectoral area of humanitarian programming. In principle, this effort to encourage greater leadership and institutional risk-taking for the protection of human rights is highly consistent with the transformation of unequal power relations and the centering of women and girls as it seeks to leverage the power of UN agencies and donor governments to protect underserved populations in humanitarian crises.[88] However, the centrality of the protection agenda can also become "protectionist," viewing people affected by conflict and crisis–especially women and girls–as passive victims in need of protection.[89]

A feminist perspective is essential to keeping the focus of reform efforts on transforming institutions and reshaping power imbalances under a human rights framework, instead of "saving" vulnerable groups. A feminist perspective directs attention to "the transformational change needed to create equality and eradicate violence."[90] This approach is embodied in both GBV and gender equality work in humanitarian action. A few examples of transformational change include GBV and gender equality legal advocacy and reform; livelihoods and entrepreneurial programming for women; capacity building of WROs/WLOs; technical and other support to relevant ministries working on gender and women's empowerment; and girls' empowerment efforts. Feminist approaches also recognize the intersections of gender with other forms of identity and oppression such as race, class, sexuality, and disability. Applying an intersectional analysis helps to ensure that the diverse experiences and needs of individuals and communities are considered—a key to promoting the centrality of protection.

Working Across the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus

Like localization, the concept of the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, which is rooted in security and development discourses of the 1990s and early 2000s, gained significant traction following the 2016 World

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[86] For example, the WASH cluster has articulated this in its Five Minimum Commitments and accompanying Safety and Accessibility Toolkit. See https://gbvguidelines.org/document/wash-minimum-commitments-to-safety-and-dignity-framework-and-tools/.

[87] IASC. (2013). The centrality of protection in humanitarian action. https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2020-11/The%20Centrality%20of%20Protection%20in%20Humanitarian%20Action%20%28English%29.pdf.

[88] See for reference: Cocking, J., Davies, G., Finney, N., Lilly, D., McGoldrick, J. & Spencer, A. (2022). Independent review of the implementation of the IASC Protection Policy. Humanitarian Policy Group. https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2022-05/Independent%20review%20of%20the%20implementation%20of%20the%20IASC%20Protection%20Policy.pdf.

[89] COFEM. (2018). Why does a feminist perspective matter in work to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls? Feminist Pocketbook Series. https://cofemsocialchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/TS1-Why-does-a-feminist-perspective-matter.pdf.

[90] Ibid.

Humanitarian Summit in the form of the New Way of Working (NWOW). This approach strove to bridge the gap between humanitarian aid and development by harmonizing the efforts of humanitarian and development actors over multi-year timeframes, addressing issues such as preparedness and risk mitigation, early recovery, and durable solutions for displaced persons.[91] The IASC currently houses a Task Force on Humanitarian Development Collaboration and its Linkages to Peace, which supports efforts to strengthen the humanitarian-development-peace collaboration among IASC partners and relevant peace and development actors.[92]

While international organizations have continued to struggle to integrate the nexus into humanitarian programming and systems, ActionAid has shown that women's rights organizations (WROs) and women-led organizations (WLOs) are consistently able to work across the nexus, even in contexts where UN agencies and international NGOs struggle to do so.[93] An analysis of four feminist women's organizations in Central America found that "by relying on feminist theory and practice, WLOs and WROs approach humanitarian action very differently from the mainstream humanitarian system."[94] These organizations promote the engagement and leadership of women in the humanitarian response, with a focus on women's empowerment and gender equality in the recovery process. This approach contributed to improved operational outcomes in local-level response to Hurricanes Mitch and Stan, including higher levels of community participation and reduced risks for marginalized groups, due to the feminist organizations' long-term presence and investments across the nexus—from humanitarian response to long-term local economic development.[95]

Improving Humanitarian Data

In the past decade, the humanitarian system has taken major steps towards integrating big data into humanitarian operations—from biometric tracking of aid recipients (including in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Jordan, Uganda, and Yemen) to the use of predictive analytics to facilitate anticipatory humanitarian response to climate disasters.[96] While the movement to integrate data and technology in humanitarian response has contributed to greater efficiency across a variety of sectors, it has also raised concerns about the ethics and equity of some of the new technologies, including infringements on the right to privacy and the issue algorithmic bias, among others.

Data feminism, a term coined by Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein in their book of the same name, provides a framework for thinking about the ways in which data can be used both to buttress existing power structures and to transform them.[97] By centering the rights and needs of women and girls in all their diversity in the world of data, a feminist perspective can reduce the likelihood of missing, biased, inaccurate, or unsafe data.[98] A feminist approach to data not only considers how it is collected, but also how it is presented (i.e. responsible data visualization), and with whom it is shared.

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[91] OCHA. (2017). New way of working. https://reliefweb.int/report/world/new-way-working.

[92] See https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-task-force-4-humanitarian-development-collaboration-and-its-linkages-peace.

[93] ActionAid. (2022). Leading the way: The nexus through a feminist lens. https://www.actionaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ActionAid%20Feminist%20Nexus_0.pdf.

[94] Vukojević, M. (2013). A critical analysis of the humanitarian response approach of Central American women's rights organizations. Oxfam Canada, p 4. https://www.oxfam.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/critical-analysis-wriha-english.pdf.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Raftree, L., & Steinacker, K. (2019). Head to head: Biometrics and aid. *The New Humanitarian.* https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2019/07/17/head-head-biometrics-and-aid ; Aly, H. (2021). The push to anticipate crises gains steam. *The New Humanitarian*. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/the-wrap/2021/9/13/the-push-to-anticipate-crises-gains-steam.

[97] D'Ignazio, C., & Klein, L. F. (2020). *Data feminism*. MIT press. Also see Umoja Noble, S. (2018). Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism, which explores how search engines generate results that can inform (and reinforce) our biased ways of thinking in terms of race, as well as other power imbalances. For the author's discussion of her research, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6KLTpoTpkXo.

[98] The GBV AoR Helpdesk published a briefing note on digital reporting of GBV that covers many concerns about data collection in the digital age. See Crabtree, K. et al. (2024). Briefing Note on Prioritizing Safety and Support in Digital reporting of Gender-based Violence. GBV AoR Helpdesk. https://gbvaor.net/node/1965

In an example of good practice (and based on ongoing lessons learned), the GBV AoR has taken considerable steps to ensure data safety in its programming, while also supporting the broader humanitarian system to pay greater attention to the needs of women and girls. *Voices from Syria* is one illustration of this: for ten years the Whole of Syria GBV AoR has annually published one of the most positively reviewed and evaluated in-depth analyses of GBV in a humanitarian context.[99] It was first produced because the normal humanitarian needs overview process was not generating sufficient information about the needs of women and girls. The report amplifies the stories of survivors, advocates, service providers, and community members to shed light on the prevalence and impact of GBV in Syria and the challenges faced in addressing this critical issue. Based on the success of the report, guidance on the data collection process has been captured in *Beyond Numbers: Improving the Gathering of GBV Data to Humanitarian Responses*.[100] This process is being replicated in other countries with humanitarian emergencies.

Mainstreaming Cross-Cutting Issues

Mainstreaming "seeks to address a particular issue or contribute to achieve a particular outcome without creating a specific sector, program or project." [101] The humanitarian system has endeavored in a variety of ways to mainstream attention to the needs of specific individuals, groups and areas of vulnerability experienced by affected populations. Examples include:

- **GBV mainstreaming,** which seeks to integrate GBV risk mitigation across all sectors to reduce the risk of GBV;[102]
- **Gender mainstreaming**, which allows humanitarian actors to consider the disparate impact of all policies and programs on the basis of gender, paying attention to the unique needs, vulnerabilities, rights, and capacities of women and girls;[103]
- **Age and disability mainstreaming,** which emphasizes the importance of inclusion of children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities in humanitarian operations;[104]
- **Mental health and psycho-social services (MHPSS) mainstreaming,** which incorporates mental health response across clusters;[105] and
- **HIV/AIDS mainstreaming**, which brings attention to the needs of those living with HIV/AIDS and HIV/AIDS prevention in humanitarian settings.

Even though there has been important progress on many of these issues—including the development and dissemination of key resources and standards—mainstreaming is still considered by some to be an add-on to existing programming, or a check-box exercise. It may be understood and adopted as a technocratic approach of undertaking specific actions, which are not always embedded in a deeper understanding of the complex social phenomena that drive the issues to be mainstreamed. While specific actions are necessary for effective mainstreaming, a key risk is that this type of technical approach can be over-simplistic. For example, in a critique of gender mainstreaming, Gupta

[99] For the most recent Voices from Syria report, see https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/whole-syria-gender-based-violence-area-responsibility-voices-syria-2023-assessment-findings-humanitarian-needs-overview-enar

[100] See https://arabstates.unfpa.org/en/publications/beyond-numbers-improving-gathering-gender-based-violence-data-inform-humanitarian

[101] Global Protection Cluster. (2018). Mainstreaming cross-cutting issues in humanitarian response. https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/infographic-mainstreaming-cross-cutting-issues-version-2018-1.pdf.

[102] See the IASC GBV Guidelines (2015). https://gbvguidelines.org/en/.

[103] IASC. (2018). The gender handbook for humanitarian action. https://www.gihahandbook.org/.

[104] Age and Disability Consortium (2018). Humanitarian Inclusion Standards for Older People and People with Disabilities. https://www.humanity-inclusion.org.uk/sn_uploads/document/humanitarian-inclusion-standards-for-older-people-and-people-with-disabilities-ADCAP.pdf

[105] IASC MHPSS Reference Group. (n.d.). Mental health and psychosocial support minimum service package. https://mhpssmsp.org/en.

et al. (2023) concluded,

> *While mainstreaming may raise awareness and fix things at the margins, its focus has been limited to altering internal processes rather than emphasizing results for women and men and girls and boys…not only is mainstreaming itself a flawed approach, it is also unrealistic to think it can succeed in a humanitarian culture that is built upon deeply patriarchal norms.*[106]

Applying a feminist perspective requires that mainstreaming efforts (and humanitarian action more generally) are not only focused on *specific activities*, but rather are aimed at *improved outcomes* for all affected populations across every area of humanitarian response. Feminist approaches center on social transformation of systems, structure, models. and ways of working.

What are some of the key barriers in promoting feminist principles in humanitarian action?

Despite the strong normative frameworks and rhetorical commitments to women's rights and empowerment, and despite empirical evidence on the value of advancing feminist principles to improve action on key humanitarian priorities, the desk review and key informant interviews identified many challenges to feminist-informed humanitarianism. Some of these challenges have been noted above, in relation to core humanitarian priorities. Notably, these challenges tend to focus less on programmatic shortcomings and more on systemic issues within humanitarian response that both *reflect* and *reinforce* norms and practices that undermine transformative change.

The result is that humanitarian action continues to perpetuate patriarchal power imbalances. This, in turn, undermines humanitarian capacity to meet many of its key goals. Several common barriers across the humanitarian system to promoting feminist principles and driving feminist-informed change are summarized briefly below.

- **Humanitarian systems and leadership are male-dominated, especially at the national level.** While significant strides have been made in integrating women into leadership positions within the UN system in recent years,[107] women are underrepresented in leadership positions within some major humanitarian organizations, and there is little evidence to indicate national and local women's rights organizations and women's right leaders are systematically included in humanitarian coordination and planning.[108] In a report from 2022 on gender and power within humanitarian action, the author concluded

  > *The [humanitarian aid] sector is unavoidably shaped by the patriarchal, heteronormative, colonial and neoliberal thinking that underpins humanitarianism as an international project. Agencies and institutions come with their own sets of norms, inequalities and unconscious biases that are shaped not only by gender but by sexuality, disability, racialisation and socioeconomic class – and these carry over to*

[106] Gupta, G. R., Grown, C., Fewer, S., Gupta, R., & Nowrojee, S. (2023). Beyond gender mainstreaming: transforming humanitarian action, organizations and culture. *Journal of International Humanitarian Action*, *8*(1), 1-20. https://jhumanitarianaction.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s41018-023-00138-1.

[107] Parity has been reached in staffing of females and males at headquarters of UN agencies, but both globally and nationally women tend to have higher representation among lower-level positions. See UNGA. (2023). Improvements in the statues of women in the United Nations system; Report of the Secretary-General. https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/status-of-women-in-the-un-system-2023-en.pdf Also see https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/status-of-women-in-the-un-system-2023-infographic-en.pdf

[108] Patel, P., Meagher, K., El Achi, N. et al. (2020) "Having more women humanitarian leaders will help transform the humanitarian system": Challenges and opportunities for women leaders in conflict and humanitarian health. *Conflict and Health* **14**, 84. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-020-00330-9; CARE (2020). Time for a better bargain: How the aid system shortchanges women and girls in crisis. https://www.care-international.org/files/files/FINAL_She_Leads_in_Crisis_Report_3_2_21.pdf.

programmes and projects. This is evident in leadership and hiring practices, where we continue to see a majority of white, European or North American men occupying senior leadership positions regardless of the setting. [109]

A desk analysis focused on women, peace and security, found that between 1992 and 2019, women constituted, on average, just 13 percent of negotiators, 6 percent of mediators, and 6 percent of signatories in major peace processes around the world.[110] Research on localization found that only 8 percent of all cluster leadership positions were held by local or national NGOs.[111] A recent review of Grand Bargain commitments found that no information is available (i.e., there is no reporting) about whether or the extent to which coordination mechanisms are regularly engaging WROs or WLOs.[112] Key informants for this review expressed concerns that women's inclusion can be tokenistic, such that women are invited to decision-making positions primarily for symbolic purposes, without their opinions being genuinely valued or considered. One key informant noted that it is rare to see WROs or WLOs engaged in cluster funding discussions, and even when their inputs are sought, the turnaround period is too short for meaningful participation. Another key informant noted that WLOs and WROs have reported that they face "backlash and retribution" when raising issues and/or criticizing the status quo in humanitarian fora.

- **There is a lack of basic awareness of or appreciation for feminist principles—and how these relate to humanitarian goals—in humanitarian leadership and humanitarian organizations**. Several key informants interviewed for this paper shared a sense that feminism is a concept not widely embraced or endorsed within humanitarian systems. One key informant noted, "There is still a sense that humanitarian actors should not get involved in women's rights—Afghanistan and Yemen are current examples where women are dying and the humanitarian response is reluctant to intervene." These key informants noted that simply using the language of feminism in global contexts (and even more so in national contexts) can be discouraged by colleagues. The reported reasons for this are various, ranging from safety concerns for women and girls, to resistance by international humanitarian actors to undertaking work to change cultural and social norms in humanitarian action. Another frequent explanation identified by key informants about the reluctance to promote feminist principles is the lack of acceptance by governments and other national actors in many humanitarian contexts.

> *"There's still this perception that a feminist approach is somehow so radical because it challenges and it provokes this transformation or this critique of the status quo, this critique of power, that people are very uncomfortable with."*
>
> --Key informant

> *"I think some of the some of what happens in humanitarian action is that everything has a technical fix, right? But a feminist approach invites people to look at things critically."*
>
> --Key informant

While the UN system has established numerous "paper commitments" to gender equality and other feminist-informed goals, implementation often falls short, creating a significant gap between policies and practical action on the ground. According to one key informant, there is "tension within humanitarian systems between those who want to pursue feminist approaches and those who endorse neutral humanitarianism." In this climate, according to another key informant, efforts to support important concepts such as intersectionality, or gender transformative change end up focusing on getting technical fixes, rather than structural change. As noted previously, the focus of and approach to core

[109] Daigle, M. (2022). Gender, power, and principles in humanitarian action. ODI Humanitarian Policy Group. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/sexualorientation/cfi-report-ga77/ngos/2022-11-10/HumanitarianPolicyGroup-Annex3.pdf.
[110] See https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/.
[111] Robillard, S., Atim, T., Maxwell, D. (2021).
[112] CARE (2020).

humanitarian agendas such as gender equality and women's empowerment can become more akin to a check-box exercise than innovation for lasting change.

- **Donors are not yet consistently integrating transformational change in their priorities for funding, nor in their approaches to financing**. As noted previously, there is ongoing and significant underfunding to address GBV, gender equality, and to engage and involve WROs. A report by the African Philanthropy Group and Bridgespan found that 0.4 percent of total humanitarian funding in 2017 went local women's organizations in Africa.[113] Only 0.09 percent of global human rights funding in 2020 went to transitional justice and peace activism led by Black women, girls, and trans people.[114] An analysis by CARE of eleven humanitarian donors found that most do not sufficiently fund gender equality or gender-sensitive programs; seven of 11 government donors included in the analysis allocated 2 percent of funds to targeted gender equality programming in humanitarian settings.[115]

> *"From donors and the humanitarian response overall, we see things like the Flash Appeals, which set the priorities for that response for the first three months—and I've personally been recently involved in two countries where the appeals were designed and published in a way that had absolutely zero connection to the reality on the ground. There was no time—literally no time—to gather any information from responders on the ground, to contribute to the appeals process. In one case, there was a five day turnaround to develop this document that will guide the expenditure of something like $80 million."*
>
> --Key informant

Another equally important issue is how donors engage with funding recipients, and to what extent transformational change is built into funding relationships. In a survey on women, peace and security, respondents noted that "cumbersome and complex application processes and procedures act as a deterrent for engaged and qualified local women's organizations."[116] Direct humanitarian funding by donors to local or national NGOs in 2020 was estimated to be between 3-4 percent, grossly below the target of 25 percent set by the Grand Bargain commitments.[117] Key informants noted traditional humanitarian donor funding is also problematic (and not feminist-informed) insofar as it mostly originates from the "global north" and is disbursed to the "global south"; traditional relationships between donor and grantee inform who has decision-making power, and who participates (or not) in setting priorities and agendas.[118]

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[113] African Philanthropy Forum and The Bridgespan Group (2021). Disparities in Funding for African NGOS: unlocking philanthropy for African NGOs as pathway to greater impact, cited in The Black Feminist Fund (2023). Where is the money for Black feminist movements? https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63e021d24b58945e72d0b01c/t/6455c25b760af64b44a3a2f9/1683341918324/Where+is+the+Money+for+Black+Feminist+Movements.pdf

[114] Candid and HRFN (2021). Advancing Human Rights: Annual Review of Global Foundation Grantmaking, cited in The Black Feminist Fund (2023).

[115] CARE (2020). Time for a Better Bargain: How the Aid System Shortchanges Women and Girls in Crisis. https://www.care-international.org/files/files/FINAL_She_Leads_in_Crisis_Report_3_2_21.pdf

[116] Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (2021). CSO Survey on Women, Peace and Security and Humanitarian Action, cited in The Black Feminist Fund (2023).

[117] Robillard, S., Atim, T., Maxwell, D. (2021).

[118] For further discussion of this, see transcripts of interviews conducted by Joy Watson with Nadia Ahidjo (African Women's Development Fund), Timiebi Souza-Okpofabri (Black Feminist Fund) and Beth Woroniuk (Former Vice President of Policy at the Equality Fund). Watson, J. (n.d.) Talking Money: Conversations on Funding the Prevention of Violence Against Women and Girls. https://prevention-collaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Collection-of-Interviews.pdf

- **Colonial and neocolonial dynamics persist as a feature of humanitarian structures and response**. "Decolonizing aid" has been a source of considerable discussion in recent years.[119] In line with this discourse, key informants for this review highlighted how humanitarian systems can perpetuate colonial and neocolonial dynamics by imposing strategies and interventions without prioritizing, consulting and understanding local contexts and priorities. A gender expert working with Plan International writes that humanitarian organizations "often operate within the frameworks of former imperial powers, hinting at a colonial 'residue' which the sector cannot seem to shake."[120] This approach is inherently anti-feminist insofar as it fails to center the agency and leadership of crisis-affected communities, particularly women and girls.

> *"We have bottlenecks of power and information in humanitarian response that are very strong. And I think we are not generally committed to pushing that downwards and outwards and making sure that everyone has access to it."*
>
> --Key informant

- **There is a lack of accountability mechanisms to support transformative change.** Some of the critiques from interviewees highlight the lack of mechanisms within the UN system to hold member states, agencies, and individuals accountable for their commitment to gender equality. This includes addressing cases of gender-based violence, discrimination, and structural inequalities within UN operations and agencies. The feminist principle of transforming unequal power relations calls upon humanitarian actors to recognize the overlapping nature of systems of oppression which operate *both* within humanitarian settings *and* inside of the organizations responding to them.

> *"Leaders need to step up and take transformative measures."*
>
> *--Key informant*

What are some effective approaches to promoting feminist principles in humanitarian action?

While there are likely as many differing views about strategies to improve the UN system to become more gender just and inclusive as there are feminisms in the world today, many feminist advocates and experts agree on the need to move beyond interventions that use feminist principles as a reference point for achieving specific programmatic objectives (such as equal numbers of males and females served in a program), towards tactics that focus more on feminist practice as a way for systems and structures to achieve core feminist (and humanitarian) outcomes.[121]

It is important to note that humanitarian response may never be inherently feminist due to its colonial history and hierarchical structure. However, even if there can never be "feminist humanitarian response," there can be strategies to utilize and uplift feminism to *improve* humanitarian response. This requires humanitarian response to move beyond instrumentalized approaches to address broader ways of working. In *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (1994), Ronald Heifetz uses the term adaptive leadership to highlight the differences between "technical challenges" which can be solved through the application of expert knowledge to specific problems and "adaptive challenges" which require systemic transformation and transformed personal and political commitments.[122]

Many of the challenges facing the current humanitarian system may be seen as adaptive problems, where feminist theory can be harnessed to overcome internal, system-type limitations (rather than solely addressing projects or program implementation). The need to address systems and ways of working has already been highlighted and addressed in many humanitarian reform efforts. However, few of them have articulated or prioritized an explicitly

[119] For more information about decolonizing aid, see this list of resources: https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2020/07/16/race-equity-neo-colonial-legacies-humanitarian/.

[120] Sonrexa, J. (2021). Revolutionary development: Why humanitarian and development aid need radical shifts. *The Humanitarian Leader*, Working Paper 014, May 2021. https://doi.org/10.21153/thl2021volno0art1076.

[121] See, for example, Gupta et al., 2023; Sonrexa, J. (2021); Hart, J., & Krueger, T. (2021). Gender-transformative change in humanitarianism: A view from inside. White Paper. Women's Refugee Commission. http://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Gender-Transformative-Change-in-Humanitarianism-View-from-Inside.pdf.

[122] Heifetz, R. (1998). *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. Harvard University Press.

feminist approach as a core method; one of the many advantages to feminism is that it seeks to align theory and practice in a way that supports transformative change.

The examples of **feminist ways of working** highlighted below are drawn from both key informant interviews and the desk review and aim to bring together both theoretical and applied knowledge in a way that **may be relevant and beneficial when activated in humanitarian systems**. These ways of working are not an exhaustive list, nor do they reflect the sum of feminist knowledge. Nevertheless, they are grounded in evidence that suggests their uptake may assist the humanitarian community to take more **strategic and systemic action** to better address humanitarian priorities. Some of these ways of working are already being selectively promoted in specific projects or sectors, but never in a comprehensive manner. Yet, these ways of working are most effective when applied as a whole, as they are closely inter-linked and reinforcing. They include:

- **Prioritizing local knowledge, agency, and leadership.** This way of working has already been referenced repeatedly in this paper. It recognizes the colonial roots of current humanitarian systems and adopts as key goals the empowerment of local actors to have ownership over their own goals, the reduction of the power of organizational hierarchies, and promotes valuing local and indigenous knowledge, expertise, and priorities, including story-telling and other sources of qualitative data.[123] "Durable solutions"—a humanitarian catchphrase that refers to strategies for lasting resolution to humanitarian crises—are only possible when humanitarian action builds on local knowledge, expertise, and priorities for long-term and equitable peace and security. This means ensuring women's perspective and leadership are actively sought and promoted, including through better engagement with and support to WLOs and WROs.

- **Uplifting relational learning, collaborative and reflexive processes, and local, regional, and global feminist networks.** This way of working reflects a feminist commitment to relationships and process-oriented approaches that facilitate mutual support and reflective learning. This approach can assist humanitarian actors to challenge personal and collective biases and assumptions and allow for continuous improvement in strategies and approaches. It recognizes the power of both formal and informal relationships and supports alliance-building throughout the humanitarian ecosystem.[124]

> "*People need to have explicit feminist values and be able to break that down into what it means operationally. You need space for people to come together and share, you need networks and working groups within and across organizations. You need connections to feminist movements to sustain the work."*
>
> *-- Key informant*

- **Promoting and practicing accountability.** Feminist humanitarian action must be deeply accountable—to affected populations, to other humanitarian actors, to donors, and to the individual and organizational principles of those undertaking response efforts. This requires humanitarian actors in all settings take account not just of the implementation of programs, but of their *impact*; give account through the effective and transparent sharing of information; and be held to account by *all* affected stakeholders for humanitarian outcomes.[125]

- **Ensuring authentic participation.** Feminist spaces allow individuals and communities to "come as they are," to authentically share experiences without fear of retaliation, and without undue barriers to entry (e.g.,

[123] Sinclair (2014); key informant interviews. For more discussion of the colonial links to humanitarian action, see Plowright, W. (2024). The Imperial Past and Decolonized Future of Humanitarian Aid. https://www.alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2024/03/20/the-imperial-past-and-decolonised-future-of-humanitarian-action/. Also see Giovetti, O. (2024). The Colonial Past of Today's Humanitarian Crises. https://www.concern.net/news/colonialism-history-humanitarian-crises

[124] For discussions about feminist relational theory, see Koggel, C. Feminist Relational Theory, Journal of Global Ethics Special Issue: Relational Theory: Feminist Approaches, Implications and Applications. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17449626.2022.2073702

[125] IASC. (2016). What is accountability to affected populations? https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2015-12/iasc_aap_psea_2_pager_for_hc.pdf.

inaccessible language, jargon, cost).[126]

- **Expressing empathy and maintaining humility.** Feminist practice is fundamentally "non-othering." It seeks to recognize a shared humanity, particularly between those with more and less power and resources, and refuses the impulse to distance humanitarian action from a deep witnessing of individual dignity and suffering.[127] Acting in feminist ways also requires individuals to embrace humility and avoid making assumptions about the accuracy of their expertise and prior knowledge.[128] Feminist ways of working seek to dismantle heroic individualism to support individuals to reclaim work-life balance and work collectively.129

- **Promoting self and collective care.** A feminist ethos recognizes the personal and collective impact of violence and systemic oppression. It prioritizes care, rest, and healing in community both for humanitarian aid workers and affected populations.[130] Holding space for attending to the emotional impact of humanitarian work, and work addressing GBV and gender inequality, is an important element of promoting care.[131]

- **Committing to transparency.** This means feminist actors are as transparent as possible in terms of their funding sources, decision-making processes, and leadership. They actively allow both internal and external scrutiny and feedback, in service of more ethical and effective humanitarian action.[132]

How can these feminist ways of working translate into feminist humanitarian action?

> *"If you say it's feminist humanitarianism, that's quite scary to a lot of people. That's the wording we want to use, but it's important to break down what that means. We do a lot of training where it's about the theory, but we need to be communicating: 'Okay, what does that practically mean in your work? And what does that like?'"*
>
> --Key informant

When exploring this question of how feminist approaches can (or should) be scaled up to improve humanitarian response, both the desk review and key informants underscored that **feminist ways to working** can serve as a reference point for "the how" of improving humanitarian systems and outcomes. While a number of areas emerged as opportunities for better integration of feminist ways of working in humanitarian response, three came up repeatedly in interviews undertaken for this review and are also heavily represented in literature calling for transformative change in humanitarian systems: **humanitarian leadership, humanitarian coordination, and humanitarian donor engagement**. Recommendations raised by key informants and the desk review across these three areas are explored further below and summarized in the reference list for improving feminist-informed humanitarian action provided in Annex 2.

Feminist Humanitarian Leadership

Activist and academic Srilatha Batliwala identifies a central conundrum in leadership of many organizations oriented

[126] Key informant interview.
[127] Ibid.
[128] Global Resilience Fund. (2022). Feminist humanitarian response: An approach to dismantle the humanitarian-industrial complex. https://www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/feminist-humanitarian-response/
[129] Rao, A, Sandler, J, Kelleher, D., and Miller, C. (2016). Gender at Work. Routledge Press.
[130] Key informant interview. For more information about collective care, see Creighton, J. (2024). Tip Sheet: Collective Care. GBV AoR Helpdesk. https://www.sddirect.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-02/GBV%20AoR%20HD%2024%20-%20Collective%20Care%20Tip%20Sheet.pdf For a summary of resources on collective care, see Creighton, J. (2024). Annotated Bibliography: Collective Care Processes and Practices. https://www.sddirect.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-03/GBV%20AoR%20HD%202024%20-%20Collective%20care%20annotated%20bibliography%20final.pdf
[131] For a discussion on the important of holding space, see Denbow, C & Watson, J. (n.d.). Feminist Research on Violence Against Women in Humanitarian and Development Settings: A Snapshot of Best Practices and Challenges. SVRI and COFEM. https://svri.org/sites/default/files/attachments/2023-02-16/P5_Feminist_Research.pdf
[132] Ibid.

to social change:

> *Why are unjust, discriminatory power dynamics being reproduced, even in subtle forms, within the very organisations dedicated to eradicating them in the larger world? While certainly not the sole factor, the dominant leadership model is a big part of the problem. In fact, transforming leadership is a central challenge to the wider project of social transformation. Leaders have failed to recognise that social transformation begins with leadership itself, and must be reflected clearly within their own practice of power, within the spaces they control, the organisations they lead, and the way they lead*.[133]

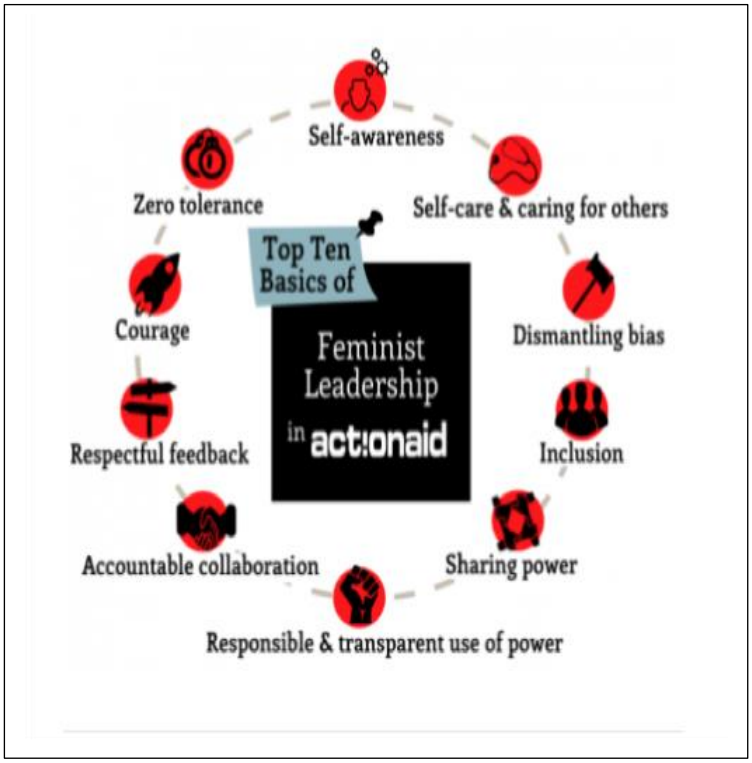
Feminist leadership is an approach that seeks to address this problem. A collective called the Fair Share of Women Leaders explains feminist leadership as:

> *a commitment to creating alternatives to traditional, hierarchical leadership and organizational cultures. This can take many different forms, from critical self-reflection on the individual level to developing new decision-making structures on the collective level. Most importantly, feminist leadership doesn't have a fixed definition or step-by-step guide. It is an ongoing process of learning and unlearning, both individually and together with others*.[134]

There is precedent for scaling up feminist leadership in humanitarian aid: organizations such as ActionAid and Oxfam are embracing and implementing feminist leadership as part of their organizational strategies, rolling out humanitarian programs that are women-led and community-based. ActionAid's *Ten Principles of Feminist Leadership* (see Figure 3) are based on the conviction that:

> *… our transformative vision of a just world free from poverty, oppression and patriarchy requires transformative feminist leaders: leaders who enable others to lead, building power with them instead of over them. To develop this approach, we have adopted a set of feminist leadership principles.*[135]

Figure 3: Action Aid's Ten Principles



Although attentive to the significance of women's representation and agency in decision-making spaces, feminist leadership is not simply "leadership by women;" it offers an approach that can be practiced by people of all genders. A key informant described feminist humanitarian leadership as an approach that,

> *recognises that our existing models of leadership are rooted in white supremacist, ableist, capitalist, and violent frameworks that perpetuate oppression and the status quo. Feminists commit to alternative leadership approaches, organisational structures and ways of working as a way to embody what justice and liberation could*

[133] Batliwala, S. (2022) Transformative Feminist Leadership: What It Is and Why It Matters, Gender and Health Hub, p 4. https://www.genderhealthhub.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Thinkpiece-Transformative-Feminist-Leadership-v4.pdf

[134] Excerpted from https://fairsharewl.org/feministleadership/#:~:text=Feminist%20Leadership%20at%20its%20most,structures%20on%20the%20collective%20level.

[135] ActionAid. (n.d.). ActionAid's ten principles of feminist leadership. https://actionaid.org/feminist-leadership.

look like in the practice of leadership.[136]

Feminist leadership offers a valuable intervention in the practice of humanitarian (and other types of) leadership because it insists on a recognition of the ways that women are demeaned and discriminated against because of their sex and provides a framework to understand harms perpetrated by those in power, including forms of sexual exploitation and abuse.[137]

The most basic action that humanitarian leaders can take to adopt a more feminist approach and realize some of the key goals of humanitarian action is to engage women in leadership decisions. This, according to learning from ActionAid and others, is the starting point. Several other examples of actions that can be taken by humanitarian leadership at the country level that align with feminist ways of working are presented in Box 1. These examples, many of which emerged in interviews undertaken for this review, demystify feminist humanitarian leadership and illustrate the potential to introduce new skills and approaches to current leadership practices on the ground.

Box 1: Examples of Actions for Humanitarian Leadership to Support Feminist Humanitarian Response in Country-Level Operations
(Emergency Relief Coordinator; Head of OCHA; Heads of Agencies; Government Counterparts)

- Identify accountability mechanisms for monitoring the implementation of feminist principles and approaches in humanitarian policies, planning, and action, such as through designating specific staff to undertake regular monitoring and reporting against a set of feminist-informed indicators, in partnership with women in the affected communities. In line with a commitment to transformative action, feminist-informed indicators typically go beyond measurement of technical activities to include analysis of ways of working. They may consider, for example, how humanitarian policies, planning and action:
  - Prioritize local knowledge, agency, and leadership;
  - Uplift relational learning, collaborative processes, and local, regional, and global feminist networks;
  - Promote accountability;
  - Ensure authentic participation;
  - Commit to transparency.
- Conduct standard and regular gendered power analysis of national and local humanitarian response systems and decision-making that includes analysis of humanitarian commitments to, actions on, and outcomes for affected populations related to:
  - Gender equality;
  - Representation and leadership of women and girls;
  - Sexual and reproductive health and rights for women and girls;
  - Ending gender-based violence;
  - Promoting intersectional approaches and social justice for all oppressed groups.
- Facilitate advisors and trainers on feminist principles, action and accountability to work at the country level with humanitarian leadership and coordinators, moving beyond instrumentalized gender mainstreaming.
- Champion humanitarian response strategies rooted in transformative change, that seek to shift power away from humanitarian organizations to affected populations. Regularly publish good practice examples on humanitarian information-sharing platforms. Create spaces, e.g. online communities of

[136] Key informant. Also see Liu, H. (2021). Redeeming Leadership: An Anti-Racist Feminist Intervention, Bristol University Press; African Feminist Forum (2007) Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists https://awdf.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/AFF-Feminist-Charter-Digital-AcA_A_-English.pdf ; Wakefield, S. Transformative and Feminist Leadership for Women's Rights." Oxfam America Research Backgrounder series (2017): https://www.oxfamamerica.org/explore/research-publications/transformative-feminist-leadership-womens-rights/ ; COFEM. (2021). Feminist Leadership Learning Brief Series. https://cofemsocialchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/COFEM_Learning-Brief-Series_Digital.pdf

[137] Sinclair, A. (2014). A feminist case for leadership. See book chapter in Damousi J., Rubenstein K., & Tomsic M. (Eds.), *Diversity in leadership: Australian women, past and present* (pp. 17-36). ANU Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13wwvj5.4.

practice, to share country-based approaches, learning and challenges.

- Elevate ministries of gender as part of humanitarian response, and actively seek to link humanitarian priorities to national feminist movements.
- Promote work/life balance, commit to reduce burnout in humanitarian response, and as part of transforming ways of working in humanitarianism. Champion policies and practices that enable individuals to balance work and personal life responsibilities, particularly addressing the unique challenges faced by women in leadership positions.
- Foster a culture of active listening and collaboration that values diverse perspectives and experiences. Support the voices of women and gender-diverse individuals in decision-making processes and ensure their views are considered.
- Promote transparency in hiring and in pay, tracking presence and pay scales of women's leadership in agencies and organizations engaged in the humanitarian response.

Feminist Humanitarian Coordination

Coordination is fundamental to humanitarian response. According to OCHA, humanitarian coordination aims to streamline efforts, avoid duplication, and maximize the impact of humanitarian assistance by facilitating communication, information sharing, and strategic decision-making among stakeholders.[138] Key informants for this paper noted that coordination mechanisms such as clusters, sector groups, and humanitarian coordination lead agencies/coordinators at the country level can play a key role in ensuring a more feminist-informed response to emergencies**.** By incorporating feminist approaches, humanitarian coordination can work to overcome traditional gender norms, challenge inequalities, and empower women and diverse groups in humanitarian response efforts. However, key informants emphasize that humanitarian coordination must go beyond tokenistic gestures and adopt a genuine commitment to gender equality and social justice to embody feminist principles in practice.

Among other responsibilities, feminist humanitarian coordination can ensure that gender perspectives are integrated into all aspects of coordination, including needs assessments, decision-making processes, and program design. Coordinators and coordination lead agencies can actively promote *meaningful* participation and leadership of women and diverse voices in coordination structures to ensure their perspectives are heard, their rights are respected, and their priorities are reflected in humanitarian responses. This requires challenging power dynamics within coordination mechanisms and promoting inclusive decision-making processes that prioritize collaboration, solidarity, and accountability to affected communities.

While a departure from the dominant status quo, there are ways of working identified through this review that can be scaled up in humanitarian coordination to enable a feminist humanitarian response. Examples of specific actions raised by key informants and captured in the literature are presented in Box 2.

Box 2: Examples of Actions for Humanitarian Coordination to Support Feminist Humanitarian Response (OCHA, Coordination Lead Agencies, Coordinators, and Coordination Partners)

- Support women's leadership and participation in humanitarian coordination structures. Provide tools and resources to facilitate WLOs to take on co-coordination leadership roles across various clusters.
- Establish a quota for WRO participation in the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), with regular monitoring and reporting that not only tracks numbers, but also includes qualitative research with WLOs to capture their perceptions about their leadership support needs.
- Establish a system that ensures NGOs are engaged in and can provide substantive feedback on Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) and Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) processes and describe this process in all HNO and HRP reports. This includes ensuring sufficient time is allocated in the humanitarian program cycle for NGOs to review HNOs/HRPs. It also requires a commitment to continuous learning about how best to increase the substantive involvement of affected populations and

[138] See https://www.unocha.org/we-coordinate.

local and national NGOs.

- In coordination meetings, ensure convening processes, action planning, partner engagement, and other coordination responsibilities serve to shift power away from humanitarian organizations to affected populations. Include strategies for this in cluster action plans and regularly report on these efforts/strategies. For example:
  - Conduct all cluster meetings in places accessible to national actors and ensure clusters do not run parallel to national systems, where safely possible. Provide transportation and other resources to support meaningful engagement of national actors. Regularly collect feedback from national actors on their engagement and include efforts to address this feedback in updates to cluster action plans.
  - Use local languages in sub-national coordination meetings and vote for the working language of national coordination meetings, with interpretation for other languages arranged as needed.
  - Prioritize shared decision-making and consensus management. Ensure, for example, all members agree on the terms of reference for the coordination group.

Feminist Humanitarian Donor Engagement.

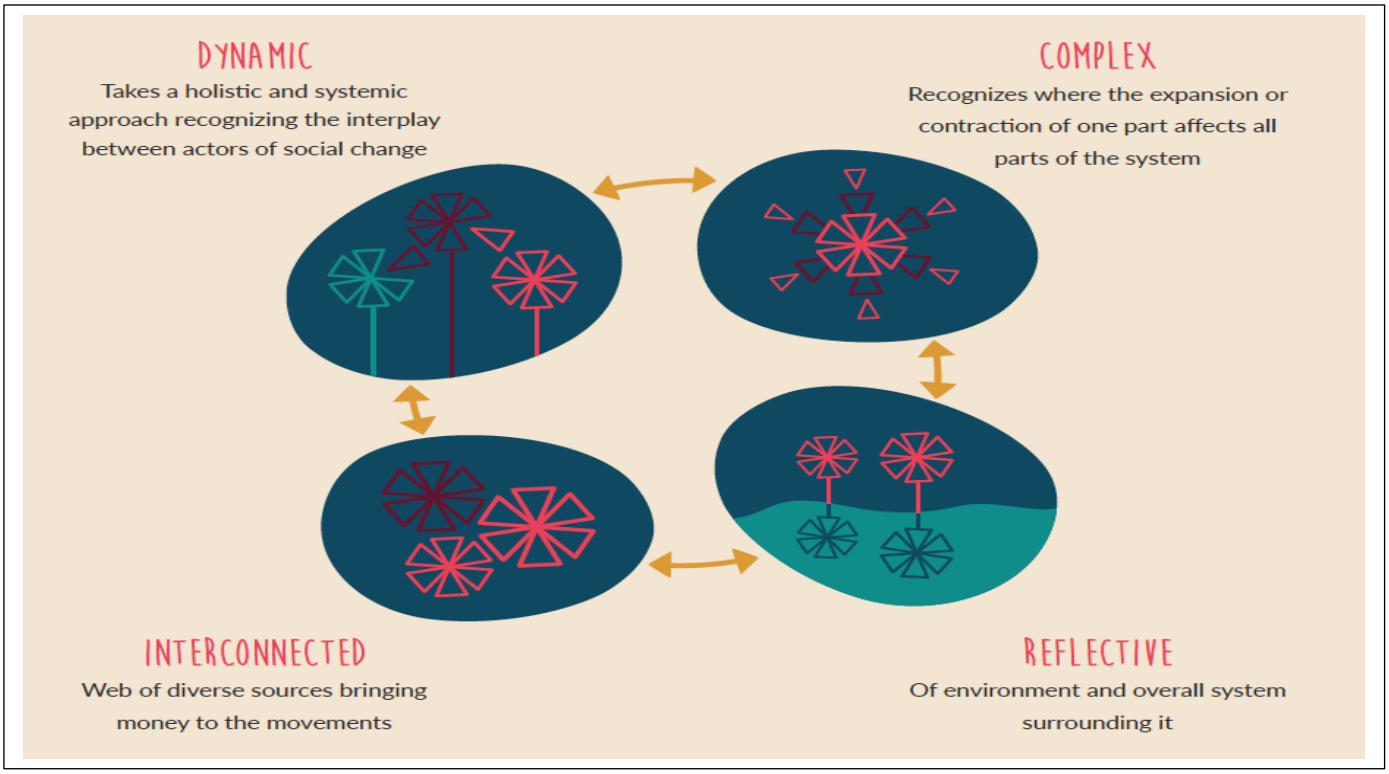
Feminist donor engagement in humanitarian response considers how donors reflect and reinforce efforts to address gender inequalities, promote women's rights, and advance gender justice. Feminist funding approaches prioritize supporting initiatives that challenge power dynamics, promote women's leadership and decision-making, and address the root causes of gender inequalities. Even beyond gender equality, feminist funding has the potential to support the realization of many humanitarian priorities, because it is an approach that is more participatory, localized, and accountable than traditional funding. According to the Women's Funding Network:

> *The data is clear. Strong feminist funds that are networked to multi-stakeholder global alliances, and to each other, create the winning recipe to accelerate change. This approach allows us to address issues that are bigger than any single border with solutions that are more powerful than any single organization.*[139]

Global guidance already exists for how funding processes can be more feminist. The Association for Women in Development (AWID) describes a feminist funding ecosystem as embodying four key principles: dynamic; complex; interconnected; and reflective (see Figure 4).[140]

[139] Excerpted from https://www.womensfundingnetwork.org/2022/09/16/save-the-date-for-feminist-funded-2023-rising/.
[140] Miller, K. and Jones, R. (2019). Toward a feminist funding ecosystem. AWID. https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/AWID_Funding_Ecosystem_2019_FINAL_Eng.pdf.

Figure 4: AWID Feminist Funding Principles



The GBV AoR Helpdesk has produced an evidence digest on *Why Partnering for Local Women's Organizations In GBV in Emergencies Programming in Crucial*.[141] The GBV AoR Helpdesk's research query on *Humanitarian Financing /Local Women's Organizations and Groups* also makes the case for funding local organizations.[142] COFEM's *Applying a Feminist Lens to Grantmaking for Addressing Violence Against Women and Girls: Funding for Transformative Change* identifies six commitments that donors can adopt to promote a feminist approach to grantmaking for GBV programming:

1. Increase funding for feminist-led GBV programs and advocacy that addresses the root causes of violence.
2. Fund programs that center women and girls in their diversity and prioritize accountability to them [including supporting local WLOs/WROs].
3. Redefine the donor-grantee relationship.
4. Promote research grounded in feminist approaches and methods.
5. Support targeted efforts to address intersecting structures of oppression that lead to GBV.
6. Embrace power analysis based on gender and 'say no' to gender neutrality.[143]

Another key issue for donors is bridging the divide between humanitarian and development funding allocations. A key informant to this review felt that for WROs, "the biggest barrier [to accessing feminist funding mechanisms] is not

[141] Robinette, K. (2023). Evidence Digest: *Why Partnering for Local Women's Organizations In GBV in Emergencies Programming in Crucial.* *https://www.sddirect.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-02/GBV%20AoR%20HD%2024%20-%20Humanitarian%20Financing%20Opportunities%20Updated.pdf*

[142] GBV AoR Helpdesk. (updated 2024). Humanitarian Financing /Local Women's Organizations and Groups. https://www.sddirect.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-02/GBV%20AoR%20HD%2024%20-%20Humanitarian%20Financing%20Opportunities%20Updated.pdf

[143] Saeed, F. (2021). Applying a Feminist Lens to Grantmaking for Addressing Violence Against Women and Girls: Funding for Transformative Change. COFEM. https://cofemsocialchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Guide-to-Grantmaking_19.10.21.pdf.

having existing relationships in the country or region." Establishing and nurturing relationships between donors and WROs and WLOs requires longer-term approaches to funding.

There are several initiatives and examples, particularly within the world of philanthropy, that illustrate the potential for humanitarian donors to adopt more feminist approaches to financing.[144] Several specific examples of actions that can be taken by humanitarian donors to embrace a more feminist approach to funding are highlighted in Box 3; in addition to these examples, donors can consider funding some of the actions to support feminist humanitarian leadership and feminist coordination noted above.

Box 3: Examples of Actions for Humanitarian Donors to Improve Feminist-Informed Engagement and Support Feminist Humanitarian Response

- Provide longer-term funding for transformative, structural change, including support for collective organizing among affected populations. Ensure that this is additive to existing commitments to humanitarian response and development programs benefiting women and girls.
- Move funding decisions to community, drawing on collaborative grantmaking models from philanthropic giving.
- Ensure direct, flexible funding to WROs and WLOs; simplify funding systems and reporting requirements for local organizations.
- Provide opportunities for national and local organizations to offer input and feedback to funders to ensure two-way communication, such as through annual partner learning exchange and feedback events, third-party reporting channels, surveys, and other mechanisms.
- Promote and fund leadership development and mentorship programs that specifically target women in the humanitarian sector. Ensure that women who take on leadership roles are supported and sustained.
- Fund learning and training around feminist humanitarianism.
- Provide funding mechanisms that allow for longer-term, sustainable solutions, and adaptability to changing needs on the ground.
- Fund self and collective care initiatives to sustain feminist humanitarian response.
- Influence organizations to have fair and equal pay scales for women and men across all organizations receiving funding and ensure the same within donor institutions.
- Undertake regular internal reviews of grantmaking practices and partner engagement to increase alignment with feminist principles and approaches.

Next Steps to an Improved Humanitarian Response

As this review has illustrated, there is a long history of efforts to advance feminist principles in humanitarian action. A wide body of evidence indicates this is for good reason: feminist principles support equality, inclusion, and empowerment. By incorporating feminist perspectives, humanitarian responses are better able to address GBV, ensure access to reproductive health care, and promote women's leadership and decision-making. Eradicating inequalities that can drive humanitarian emergencies is crucial for promoting sustainable peace and development.

Actively promoting feminist principles and approaches can drive better outcomes linked to some of the key humanitarian agendas discussed in this paper, including AAP, localization, centrality of protection, the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, and humanitarian data. Despite this value, and in spite of the existence of a normative framework within the UN that derives from and reinforces feminist principles, humanitarian aid is still widely criticized as patriarchal in nature.

In critiquing the gap between feminist rhetoric and patriarchal practice in humanitarian action, some feminist activists

[144] See, for example, https://www.globalfundforwomen.org/what-we-do/women-in-philanthropy-a-feminist-philanthropy-infographic/

have pinpointed how feminism in humanitarian action has become stuck at the level of program interventions, rather than structural change. The application of feminist approaches within non-feminist systems requires a framework for action—one that is not just about rhetorical commitments to feminist principles, but that supports active engagement in feminist *ways of working*. This places the focus on process—the *how* of building a feminist humanitarian response—and the *impact* of that process *for women and girls* and communities affected by humanitarian crises.

This paper has identified humanitarian leadership, humanitarian coordination, and humanitarian donors, as key change-makers for shifting to more feminist ways of working in humanitarian response. The paper provides examples of feminist actions across these three groups that are based on documented evidence as well as data provided by key informants. **Developing strategies for implementing and expanding these actions is an important area for future work, as is cascading learning and capacity on feminist ways of working throughout the humanitarian ecosystem.**

Notably, however, the focus on leadership, coordination, and donors in this paper should not imply that these are the sole entities for building out more feminist-informed humanitarian response. Rather, these three focal areas provide a starting point for advancing humanitarian outcomes through the lens of feminist theory. At the heart of this work is leadership of affected communities, especially leadership that is by women, for women, and with women.

Annex 1: Key Informant Interview Guide

Key Informant Interview (KII) Guide for Guidance Note on Applying Feminist Approaches to Humanitarian Action

This guide will be used to gather insights and perspectives from experts in GBV programming, humanitarian coordination, feminist theory and practice, and humanitarian advocacy on applying feminist approaches to humanitarian action. All questions do not need to be asked in every interview—the interviewer should select questions from Sections 2, 3, and 4 based on the participant's responses to Section 1 and their background/areas of expertise.

Introduction: Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. This interview is designed to inform a forthcoming guidance note on applying feminist approaches to humanitarian action which will be published by the GBV AoR Helpdesk. The interview will last approximately one hour and aim to gather insights and reflections from you on ways to define a feminist approach, the links between feminist principles and the humanitarian ecosystem, and good practices and barriers to applying a feminist approach to humanitarian action.

Anything you say will be kept confidential within the writing team and will not be directly attributed to you or your organization in the guidance note.

Do you have any questions?

1) Defining a feminist approach and understanding its key principles *I'd like to start off by asking you some big-picture questions about how you define a feminist approach and its key principles.*
1a: In a few sentences, what does a feminist approach to humanitarian action look like to do?
1b: What are some of the key principles or aspects of feminist theory that you see as most relevant to humanitarian action? And why? [If they start getting specific, say "We'll get into some details on specific aspects of humanitarian action later in the interview."]
1c: To what extent is a feminist approach currently being applied in humanitarian settings?
1d: Is it important to talk about feminist principles in explicit ways in humanitarian work? Why or why not? What is the value of using the language of feminism to support improved humanitarian action? • Have you heard of or seen other approaches similar to a feminist framework being used in the humanitarian sector?

2) Examining links between feminist principles and the humanitarian ecosystem *Now I'd like to hear your thoughts on links between the feminist principles you mentioned and some specific aspects of the humanitarian ecosystem: coordination, funding, programming, staffing/HR, and current thematic priorities. We are primarily looking at UN-led coordination systems but also would love to hear about other structures if relevant.*

2a: How do UN-led global coordination structures or other systems promote or hinder feminist ways of working in the humanitarian space? How could a feminist approach improve **humanitarian coordination**? (Any examples?)
2b: What would a feminist approach to humanitarian **funding mechanisms** look like? (Any examples?)
2c: What would a feminist approach to humanitarian **programming** look like? (Any examples?)
2d: What would a feminist approach to **staffing/human resources** policies look like within the humanitarian ecosystem? (Any examples?)
2e: Where does a feminist approach overlap or build on existing thematic or population-specific agendas? *Probe for:* • Accountability to affected populations (AAP) • Localization • Humanitarian-Development-Peacekeeping Nexus • Centrality of Protection
2f: How would a feminist approach inform **engagement with women and girls** in humanitarian settings?

3) Identifying good practices for and potential barriers to applying feminist principles to humanitarian response *In the next few questions, I'll ask you about good practices for and potential barriers to applying feminist principles in humanitarian response.*
3a: Where have you seen good examples of feminist approaches to programming in GBV work or in other areas of humanitarian action? What is it that makes this a 'good' or 'promising' example in your view? *Probe for:* • Inclusive/intersectional approaches
3b: So far, has a feminist approach contributed to changing the overall structures that underpin gender inequality? If so, how?
3c: What barriers exist to applying feminist approaches in your own work?

4) Providing recommendations for building efforts to overcome barriers and scale-up good practices and identifying priority areas for further learning and research

To close this interview, I have a few more questions about your recommendations to overcome barriers, scale up good practices, and identify priority areas for further learning and research.
4a: What lessons can be learned from feminist efforts to address GBV that are relevant to the broader humanitarian community?
4b: What evolutions or emerging developments in feminist theory and research do you think should be highlighted in a feminist framework for humanitarian action?
4c: What do you think are the priorities for further learning and research about feminist approaches in humanitarian action?
4d: What kinds of guidance, resources, policies, or capacity building would help you and your colleagues? apply a more feminist approach to your work?

Wrap Up: Thank you for taking the time to talk to me about this. We appreciate your perspective and insights!

Annex 2: A Reference List for Improving Feminist-Informed Humanitarian Action

This checklist brings together key feminist principles and ways of working to stimulate thinking about how to support feminist-informed action for more effective and impactful humanitarian response.

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">Key Questions for Humanitarian Actors in Moving Towards More Feminist Humanitarian Response</th></tr>
<tr><th>Feminist Principles</th><th>Feminist Ways of Working</th></tr>
<tr><td>1. Does your (policy, organization, staff, project, etc.) support one or more of the feminist principles indicated below?

2. How does your (policy, organization, staff, project, etc.) implement these principles in action?</td><td>3. Does your (policy, organization, staff, project, etc.) facilitate the feminist ways of working indicated below?

4. How does your (policy, organization, staff, project, etc.) action these ways of working in practice?</td></tr>
<tr><td>● Transform unequal power relations between men and women.
● Ensure representation and leadership of women and girls.
● Promote bodily autonomy and rights of women and girls.
● Ensure safety for women and girls.
● Take an intersectional approach.
● Promote social justice for all oppressed groups.</td><td>● Prioritize local knowledge, agency, and leadership.
● Uplift relational learning, collaborative processes, and local, regional, and global feminist networks.
● Promote Accountability.
● Ensure Authentic Participation.
● Express Empathy.
● Maintain Humility.
● Promote Self and Collective Care.
● Commit to Transparency.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Examples of Actions for Humanitarian Leadership to Support Feminist Humanitarian Response in Country-Level Operations
(Emergency Relief Coordinator; Head of OCHA; Heads of Agencies; Government Counterparts)</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">● Identify accountability mechanisms for monitoring the implementation of feminist principles and approaches in humanitarian policies, planning, and action, such as through designating specific staff to undertake regular monitoring and reporting against a set of feminist-informed indicators, in partnership with women in the affected communities. In line with a commitment to transformative action, feminist-informed indicators typically go beyond measurement of technical activities to include analysis of ways of working. They may consider, for example, how humanitarian policies, planning and action:
• Prioritize local knowledge, agency, and leadership;
• Uplift relational learning, collaborative processes, and local, regional, and global feminist networks;
• Promote accountability;
• Ensure authentic participation;
• Commit to transparency.
● Conduct standard and regular gendered power analysis of national and local humanitarian response systems and decision-making that includes analysis of humanitarian commitments to, actions on, and outcomes for affected populations related to:
• Gender equality;
• Representation and leadership of women and girls;
• Sexual and reproductive health and rights for women and girls;
• Ending gender-based violence;
• Promoting intersectional approaches and social justice for all oppressed groups.
● Facilitate advisors and trainers on feminist principles, action and accountability to work at the country level with humanitarian leadership and coordinators, moving beyond instrumentalized gender</td></tr>
</table>

mainstreaming.

- Champion humanitarian response strategies rooted in transformative change, that seek to shift power away from humanitarian organizations to affected populations. Regularly publish good practice examples on humanitarian information-sharing platforms. Create spaces, e.g. online communities of practice, to share country-based approaches, learning and challenges.
- Elevate ministries of gender as part of humanitarian response, and actively seek to link humanitarian priorities to national feminist movements.
- Promote work/life balance, commit to reduce burnout in humanitarian response, and as part of transforming ways of working in humanitarianism. Champion policies and practices that enable individuals to balance work and personal life responsibilities, particularly addressing the unique challenges faced by women in leadership positions.
- Foster a culture of active listening and collaboration that values diverse perspectives and experiences. Support the voices of women and gender-diverse individuals in decision-making processes and ensure their views are considered.
- Promote transparency in hiring and in pay, tracking presence and pay scales of women's leadership in agencies and organizations engaged in the humanitarian response.

Examples of Actions for Humanitarian Coordination to Support Feminist Humanitarian Response (OCHA, Coordination Lead Agencies, Coordinators, and Coordination Partners)

- Support women's leadership and participation in humanitarian coordination structures. Provide tools and resources to facilitate WLOs to take on co-coordination leadership roles across various clusters.
- Establish a quota for WRO participation in the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), with regular monitoring and reporting that not only tracks numbers, but also includes qualitative research with WLOs to capture their perceptions about their leadership support needs.
- Establish a system that ensures NGOs are engaged in and can provide substantive feedback on Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) and Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) processes and describe this process in all HNO and HRP reports. This includes ensuring sufficient time is allocated in the humanitarian program cycle for NGOs to review HNOs/HRPs. It also requires a commitment to continuous learning about how best to increase the substantive involvement of affected populations and local and national NGOs.
- In coordination meetings, ensure convening processes, action planning, partner engagement, and other coordination responsibilities serve to shift power away from humanitarian organizations to affected populations. Include strategies for this in cluster action plans and regularly report on these efforts/strategies. For example:
  - Conduct all cluster meetings in places accessible to national actors and ensure clusters do not run parallel to national systems, where safely possible. Provide transportation and other resources to support meaningful engagement of national actors. Regularly collect feedback from national actors on their engagement and include efforts to address this feedback in updates to cluster action plans.
  - Use local languages in sub-national coordination meetings and vote for the working language of national coordination meetings, with interpretation for other languages arranged as needed.
  - Prioritize shared decision-making and consensus management. Ensure, for example, all members agree on the terms of reference for the coordination group.

Examples of Actions for Humanitarian Donors to Improve Feminist-Informed Engagement and Support Feminist Humanitarian Response

- Provide longer-term funding for transformative, structural change, including support for collective organizing among affected populations. Ensure that this is additive to existing commitments to humanitarian response and development programs benefiting women and girls.
- Move funding decisions to community, drawing on collaborative grantmaking models from philanthropic giving.
- Ensure direct, flexible funding to WROs and WLOs; simplify funding systems and reporting

requirements for local organizations.

- Provide opportunities for national and local organizations to offer input and feedback to funders to ensure two-way communication, such as through annual partner learning exchange and feedback events, third-party reporting channels, surveys, and other mechanisms.
- Promote and fund leadership development and mentorship programs that specifically target women in the humanitarian sector. Ensure that women who take on leadership roles are supported and sustained.
- Fund learning and training around feminist humanitarianism.
- Provide funding mechanisms that allow for longer-term, sustainable solutions, and adaptability to changing needs on the ground.
- Fund self and collective care initiatives to sustain feminist humanitarian response.
- Influence organizations to have fair and equal pay scales for women and men across all organizations receiving funding and ensure the same within donor institutions.
- Undertake regular internal reviews of grantmaking practices and partner engagement to increase alignment with feminist principles and approaches.

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The GBV AoR Help Desk

The GBV AoR Helpdesk is a unique research and technical advice service which aims to inspire and support humanitarian actors to help prevent, mitigate and respond to violence against women and girls in emergencies. Managed by Social Development Direct, the GBV AoR Helpdesk is staffed by a global roster of senior Gender and GBV Experts who are on standby to help guide frontline humanitarian actors on GBV prevention, risk mitigation and response measures in line with international standards, guidelines and best practice. Views or opinions expressed in GBV AoR Helpdesk Products do not necessarily reflect those of all members of the GBV AoR, nor of all the experts of SDDirect's Helpdesk roster.

The GBV AoR Helpdesk

You can contact the GBV AoR Helpdesk by emailing us at: enquiries@gbviehelpdesk.org.uk

The Helpdesk is available 09.00 to 17.30 GMT Monday to Friday.

Our services are free and confidential.