

# Feminist crisis response to natural disasters in complex crisis:

Case study on the earthquake response of  
Women Now for Development in Syria and Turkey

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## About the learning paper production team:

### **Research, co-facilitation, analysis, and writing:**

#### **Cassie Denbow (She)**

##### **Feminist resource mobilisation specialist**

Cassie Denbow is a facilitator, organiser, and feminist resource mobilisation specialist with a focus on moving resources to self-led groups operating in spaces of contestation and crisis. As an independent consultant with a broad understanding of the resources needed to power feminist organising, her work varies from facilitating internal learning and change processes, fundraising, analysis of funding flows, and strategy design and development. She is interested in - and regularly uses - creative methodologies for sensemaking, consensus building, and processes of catharsis.

Cassie has worked with diverse feminist groups from small, unregistered groups and transnational organisations alike. Her personal organising is focused on reparations in the context of Northern Ohio, USA and transnationally.

### **Research design & management, co-facilitation, and analysis support:**

#### **Batoul AIEITA (She)**

##### **MEAL Manager**

Syrian Specialist in the field of planning, monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning with more than 10 years' experience. She has worked with governmental and non-governmental agencies, international and national humanitarian organisations, civil society and evaluation firms bringing in perspectives on human rights, context sensitivity and gender approaches. She has lived and worked in the Middle East region and France.

She has intensive experience in designing, managing, and delivering impact evaluations, as well as developing theories of change and MEAL frameworks for interventions in a variety of sectors and topics, including gender, women's empowerment, youth interventions, accountability, capacity building for individuals and local civil society, and human rights. She brings a relevant understanding of gender equity and equality, context and conflict sensitivity, Do-no-harm principles, and human rights to MEAL works and studies.

## **Context inputs, Review and Validation:**

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### **Maria Al Abdeh (She)**

**Executive Director of Women Now for Development**

Dr. Maria Al Abdeh is a researcher and human rights advocate, through a feminist lens. She has published several research articles on the gender impact of conflict and Syrian women's perspective on peace and justice. She has received several awards for her engagement towards human rights and women's rights in Syria.

### **Lubna Kanawati (She)**

**Deputy Director at Women Now for Development**

Syrian feminist and women's rights activist, serving as Deputy Director at Women Now for Development. Her journey began in the early days of the Syrian revolution, where she joined protests for justice and dignity. Recognizing the dire conditions faced by women during the conflict, Lubna took on the critical role of providing humanitarian aid in besieged areas. Throughout her journey, Lubna has been a tireless advocate against human rights abuses. She has documented violations, supported fellow civilians, and passionately advanced accountability for chemical weapons attacks on Syrian civilians while combating gender-based violence.

**Proofreading:**

Victoria Lupton

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**Disclaimer:**

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## **Thank you & Acknowledgments:**

### **To the WND Team**

To the amazing team of Women Now for Development, to every woman and man in it.

As we reflect on our feminist response to the earthquake that struck North Syria after 12 years of bloody conflict, marked by complexity, we are filled with immense gratitude for each and every one of you. Your unwavering dedication, resilience, and selflessness have been the driving force behind our collective efforts to navigate through the challenges, grief, and loss that have defined this period.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, your response exemplified resilience and a profound commitment to life. Your actions were not just a testament to your strength but also a shining example of empathy and compassion towards both us and others.

Throughout it all, you have embodied honesty, transparency, sincerity, and love in everything you do. Your unwavering commitment to these values has not only shaped our feminist response but has also touched the lives of many individuals and groups in our community.

In a world where uncertainty and hardship abound, your unwavering efforts give us hope and inspiration.

Thank you for your resilience, your dedication, and your commitment to making a difference in the lives of others. Together, we will continue to create positive change and build a better future for all.

### **To our partner women-led initiatives**

In the aftermath of the earthquake, we are moved beyond words by your remarkable courage and resilience. Despite the devastating losses you suffered and the personal hardships you endured; you rose from the rubble with unwavering determination to extend a helping hand to others in need.

Your relentless efforts to rally support, gather donations, and coordinate aid distribution embody the true spirit of solidarity and compassion. Despite facing countless obstacles along the way, you refused to back down or leave anyone behind. Your tireless commitment to making a positive impact, even in the face of adversity, is nothing short of inspiring.

We are deeply honoured to stand alongside such courageous and compassionate partners. Your passion, determination, and unwavering spirit inspire us all to strive for a better, more compassionate world.

Thank you for your extraordinary commitment to making a difference in the lives of others. Together, we will continue to stand strong, shoulder to shoulder, in solidarity with those in need.

**To our partner donors**

We extend our heartfelt appreciation to you for the swift, flexible, and generous support during our feminist response to the devastating earthquake that hit south Turkey and North Syria in February 2023. Your significant contribution has been instrumental in securing our team and enabling us to serve the women and communities affected by this disaster.

In times of crisis, having partners like you is invaluable. Their commitment to being a part of both the challenges and successes speaks volumes about their dedication to making a positive impact in times of need.

We are deeply grateful for the trust and support extended by you, which has not only facilitated our response efforts but also contributed to the resilience of the communities we serve.

Thank you for being an integral part of our mission.

## Terminology & Acronyms

**Complex Crisis:** describes the interlinking complexity that is created when an emergency / natural disaster happens in an area already impacted by ongoing conflict, economic, environmental, and/or political instability.

**Donors:** a broad term that refers to any institution – feminist or traditional – that gave money to support Women Now's work.

**FGD:** focus group discussions, a key research methodology used during our learning process. These were facilitated online spaces intended to understand the experience of people leading the earthquake response.

**IDP:** internally displaced persons

**Localisation:** the process of shifting humanitarian decision making and funding from international non-governmental organisations and multi-lateral institutions to locally rooted and locally based organisations.

**MEAL:** monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning; WND's approach to evaluation is rooted in feminist concepts of MEAL and deeply guided this learning process.

**NWS:** Northwest Syria.

**PTSD:** post traumatic stress disorder

**WND:** Women Now for Development

**Women-led initiatives (WLI):** both formal, registered organisations and unregistered groups, led by women and operating in Northwest Syria that take a gender aware - and sometimes explicitly feminist - approach to their work.

**Wellbeing:** in the context of the WND earthquake response, it refers to the mental, emotional, physical, and psychological state of the team. Wellbeing is an individually felt experience - and varies by person. It is rooted in an organisational commitment to individual agency, possibility, and wholeness.



الزلازل لا تعرف حدوداً... أنقذوا سوريا

Depram sınırları tanımaz... Suriyeyi yardım edin

Earthquakes know no borders... Help Syria

Les tremblements de terre ne  
connaissent pas de frontières... Aidez la Syrie

Women Now  
For Development  
النساء الآن للتنمية



## Executive Summary:

A feminist crisis response is one that centres and accounts for the diverse needs of vulnerable communities. It is contextually rooted in and accountable to communities and seeks to transform and challenge gendered power differentials in its design - including in who leads the response. A feminist crisis response is explicitly political - challenging power hierarchies and structural inequality including in the communities that the response is unfolding in. Even while responding to immediate needs, a feminist response has an eye on long-term social transformation.

On February 6th, 2023, a magnitude 7.8 earthquake rocked South-east-Central Turkey and Northwest Syria. Over 55,000 people were killed, hundreds of thousands were injured, and millions in Turkey and Syria were displaced. Women Now for Development (WND) - Syria's largest feminist organisation - knew immediately a natural disaster of this scale would bring immense devastation. Within 24 hours the WND team rolled into action implementing a three-phase feminist earthquake response that will wrap up in Mid-March 2024.

The response addressed both the immediate humanitarian and advocacy needs, as well as the long-term sustainability of women-led organising in Northwest Syria. WND immediately secured the safety of 97 members of the Women Now team and their families. It called on the UN and the international community to allow life-saving aid and technical support into Northwest Syria. Women Now used its existing networks in Northwest Syria to identify needs of women and children once again displaced by the disaster, and prepared and distributed 1,653 emergency relief kits for women and 145 infant kits to Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps. Women Now worked with 15 women-led initiatives across Northwest Syria, providing emergency cash as-

sistance to 77 individual team members, emergency response grants to initiatives, PSS support for teams, and technical support services over the next 9 months.

Northwest Syria was not the only place in 2023 to experience a natural disaster worsened by protracted conflict, limited / no governmental infrastructure, and an ongoing crisis of forced displacement. Herat Province in Afghanistan experienced multiple devastating earthquakes and Northeast Libya was inundated with severe flooding that killed thousands. Around the world, more and more communities are extremely vulnerable to uncontrollable natural disasters worsened by economic and political instability and conflict and exacerbated by the climate crisis.

This learning paper documents Women Now for Development's earthquake response, with the goal of modelling feminist crisis response in action. Through their work and experience, the Women Now team identified seven distinctions of a feminist crisis response:

1. Enacts practices of dignity, agency, and consent
2. Alleviates loneliness and desolation felt by the WND team impacted by the earthquakes
3. Short-term mitigation of the impacts of vicarious trauma
4. Meets the emergency response needs of women and children
5. Invests in the resilience of local women-led organising
6. Catalyses shifts in society's perception of women
7. Models how to live humanitarian rhetoric in practice: flexibility, localisation, and solidarity with local groups
8. Mitigates the risks and occurrences of exploitation and sexual violence in crisis

The Women Now response demonstrates that locally-led, women's groups are best positioned to design and lead rapid, responsive, and contextual emergency responses: responses that address immediate humanitarian needs while holding long-term visions for a just and equitable Syrian society at the response's core. However, the response fundamentally shifted Women Now's organisational horizon lines, and came at a direct cost to the wellness of the WND team and the sustainability of the organisation. Based on the experience of running the response, WND developed three sets of recommendations for donors and international humanitarian organisations, feminist and humanitarian peer organisations operating in complex crises, and for Syrian women-led initiatives.

For donors, recommendations contextualise existing feminist advocacy efforts calling for a money movement architecture that is rooted in solidarity, risk-sharing, and moves more and better money to locally led groups. We call on donors to:

1. Expand risk thresholds, and share risks with partners
2. Invest in training + emergency preparedness for all partners operating in complex crisis
3. Fund organisational wellness practices. Reflect a commitment to wellness in reporting timelines and grant processes.
4. Resource the years after the crisis, as willingly as you resourced the crisis response
5. Syrian feminist groups in exile: a necessary safeguarding of rights-based work
6. Fund research that further explores the relationship between feminist crisis response and the mitigation of sexual exploitation and violence during crisis

For front-line feminist and women-led groups around the world, as well as small / mid-size humanitarian organisations, the learning paper seeks to support in planning and preparing for the reality of complex crises. To support this goal, we encourage organisations to:

1. Prepare a comprehensive emergency response, action plan, and accompanying organisational infrastructure
2. Take time to develop internal care strategies and team relationship building as a strategy for organisational sustainability
3. For Feminist Peer Orgs: Focus on developing a network of feminist and women's rights donors that care to understand your work and context
4. For Non-Feminist Humanitarian Orgs: Familiarise yourself with the definition of a feminist response and what these principals look like in the context of your work.

Finally, to the Syrian women-led initiatives - both those we already work with and don't yet know - we see and honour your work and encourage the following:

1. Focus on building self-led coordination networks
2. Self-assess your capacity and resources and tailor your work accordingly
3. Take care of your team, and take care of each other
4. Advocate for your needs: practise speaking up at the regional and the international level.

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#### **Annex A: Past WND Emergency + Crisis Response**

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*“ Responding to a disaster in a region devastated by conflict and the absence of a state is something completely different from responding to a disaster in a normal place and in a state, something different in every way, and this thing has not been taken into account until now and we have not learned from the experience that happened. Now if there is another earthquake, we will die in silence... Nothing is worse than what happened because everyone is exhausted and exhausted. ”*

*WND team member in Europe*

## A. Introduction:

### a. This is not a celebration, it's a learning.

This learning paper documents an internal reflection and learning process at Women Now for Development on the earthquake response. It seeks to model how feminist values and a gender sensitive emergency response can be operationalised in the context of Northwest Syria. It seeks to contribute to ongoing transnational localisation and humanitarian discourse by defining a contextualised concept of feminist crisis response. Finally, it seeks to share our experience of the response with peer organisations looking for evidence and practice of the impact and power of feminist crisis response.

While the learning process - held between October 2023 - January 2024 - documents the resilience, commitment, and the profound commitment to humanity of our team, this paper is not a celebration. It is a shrine for those killed and those left behind who find their lives indelibly shaped by the trauma of the earthquake and the accompanying, and repeated displacement that followed. For the WND team, it is a documentation of the learnings and best practices of an emergency response that fundamentally shifted our organisational horizon lines, and came at a direct cost to our individual and collective wellness and the sustainability of the organisation.

For the rest of us reading - especially those sitting by levers of resources and power in philanthropic and humanitarian spaces - this paper asks us to once again examine what feminist solidarity in practice looks like. With support from feminist partners, WND was successfully able to raise significant and rapid flexible resources for the earthquake response. However, the continued challenge of raising day to day resources for WND reveals the ways in which the inter-

national humanitarian and philanthropic ecosystem continues to let Syrian women-led organisations down - despite widespread rhetoric on the importance of localisation and place-based solutions. While feminist funders and women's funds were key resource allies in the response, more can be done to share the burden and risk of responding to complex crises. This is addressed in detail in the Recommendations and action section.

The efficacy of WND's response - despite the tremendous structural barriers surrounding it - demonstrates once again that locally led women's groups are best positioned to design responsive, and contextual responses that address immediate humanitarian needs while holding long-term visions for women's rights and gender justice at the response's core.

This learning paper demonstrates the flexibility in goals, project design, and budget required to respond to a natural disaster in a gender-sensitive and feminist way in an area with nearly 13 years of ongoing conflict. As we will all learn, the rigidity of the current philanthropic & humanitarian system is not designed to meet the complexity of these realities, leaving local groups like WND and our partners to fill the gaps alone. However, this is not our work to do alone - such extreme and widespread levels of burnout speak to the ways in which our philanthropic and human rights resourcing systems continue to fall short, despite rhetorics of localisation and a stated desire to be in solidarity.

Northwest Syria was not the only place in 2023 to experience a natural disaster worsened by protracted conflict, limited / no governmental infrastructure, and an ongoing crisis of forced displacement. Herat Province in Afghanistan experienced multiple devastating earthquakes and Northeast Libya was inundated with severe flooding that

killed thousands. Around the world, more and more communities are left extremely vulnerable to uncontrollable disasters worsened by economic and political instability and exacerbated by the climate crisis. We hope that the feminist crisis response modelled in this learning paper can support front-line feminist and women-led groups around the world in planning and preparing for the reality of complex crises. Finally, in conjunction with donors and humanitarian groups, we hope such models can be advanced and contextualised in other spaces around the world supporting the sustainability and resilience of our Global Majority gender justice and feminist movements and the people that compose them.

## b. Earthquake Response Background & Context:

On February 6th, 2023, a magnitude 7.8 earthquake rocked Southeast-central Turkey and Northwest Syria. 9 hours later - a 7.7 magnitude earthquake struck again just 95 km away.

As of March 1st, 2023, over 11,000 aftershocks were recorded across the region<sup>1</sup>. The toll of the quakes is utterly devastating.

Over 55,000 people were killed, and hundreds of thousands were injured. 3 million people were displaced in Turkey<sup>2</sup> and in Syria - where the final number of internally displaced people due to the earthquake varies from 1.8-2.8 million people - It is reported that the earthquake hit areas in Northwestern Syria where 89% of the population had been displaced at least once (if not more -23% displaced eight times) during the 12 years of conflict, and were again displaced by the February 6 earthquakes.<sup>3</sup>



1. "2023 Turkey-Syria Earthquake," Center for Disaster Philanthropy, February 2023, <https://disasterphilanthropy.org/disasters/2023-turkey-syria-earthquake/>.

2. "Türkiye: 2023 Earthquakes Situation Report No. 11, as of 23 March 2023 [En/TR] - Türkiye." ReliefWeb, March 24, 2023. <https://reliefweb.int/report/turkiye/turkiye-2023-earthquakes-situation-report-no-11-23-march-2023-entr>

3. Action for Humanity. "No Place but Displacement: A Report into Multiple Displacement of Idps in Northwest Syria Due to 12 Years of Conflict and February 6th's Earthquakes - Syrian Arab Republic." ReliefWeb, March 16, 2023. <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/no-place-displacement-report-multiple-displacement-idps-northwest-syria-due-12-years-conflict-and-february-6ths-earthquakes>.



Women Now for Development (WND) - Syria's largest feminist organisation - was immediately aware that a natural disaster of this scale would bring immense devastation. Within 24 hours, the WND team established emergency taskforces<sup>4</sup> composed of team members in Europe and unaffected areas in Turkey. Working in shifts to enable 24/7 communication with impacted teams in Turkey & Syria, the taskforces held regular meetings to evaluate and modify the emergency response plans to account for a rapidly shifting context.

### 1. Phase 1 - immediate response - Feb 7th - 17th:

- Resourcing the immediate evacuation, resettlement, and stabilisation of 97 team members and their families including children and the elderly with complex medical needs impacted by the earthquake. This included specialised support for 5 pregnant team members.
- Launch an online advocacy campaign "Disasters Knows No Borders" urging for the rapid opening of emergency border passage routes for rescue teams and equipment into Northwest Syria. The campaign worked to shine light on the realities of women and girls impacted by the earthquake in their own words. It also provided guidelines on sexual exploitation risks in crisis. The campaign took place on social media and the WND blog and ran until the end of May.

### 2. Phase 2 - mid-term response - Feb 17th - August 2023

- Team:
  - Continued cash assistance for WND team impacted by the earthquake.



4. WND Earthquake response taskforces: Media & Advocacy, Evacuation and Housing, Protection, Grants & Fundraising, Financial Management

- Mid-term alternative housing options for WND team.
- PSS provision for WND team members impacted by the crisis.
- Community:
  - rehabilitation of WND women's shelter damaged by the earthquake.
  - Re-opening of WND programming in affected areas.
- Resourcing the resilience of women-led initiatives across Northwest Syria In disaster response and recovery activities:
  - 77 team members of 10 women-led initiatives heavily impacted by the earthquake supported with emergency cash assistance.
  - PSS & capacity support for women-led initiatives

### **3. Phase 3 - long-term response - April - ongoing**

- Team:
  - PSS provision, individual and group, for WND team members
- Community:
  - Distribution of 1,653 emergency relief kits for women<sup>5</sup> and 145 infant kits<sup>6</sup> to internally displaced persons (IDP) camps across Northwest Syria;
  - Group and individual psychological support for women and children.
  - Reactivating and rebuilding women & girl safe spaces that faced severe damage / financial constraints after the earthquake.
- Resourcing the engagement and participation of women-led initiatives across Northwest Syria in disaster response and recovery activities:
  - Emergency response grants to 15 women-led initiatives
  - PSS services to support WLI to continue and strengthen their programming; ongoing PSS sessions for the WND team.
- International community:
  - As part of 16 days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, the WND team ran a campaign on the risks of sexual exploitation amid crisis with guidelines, practices, and protocols. Testimonies from women impacted by the earthquake were included in this campaign.

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5. 1 Emergency Relief Kit was designed for two women / girls above the age of 13. They included over 40 items including hygiene products such as menstrual pads, tissues, towels, and soap. Clothing including leggings, wool blouses, underwear, and head veils. Household items including cleaning detergent, tarpaulin, and dishwashing liquid. Personal care items such as moisturiser and hair clips.

6. Infant kits included three sizes of diapers, Cream for skin rash, baby bodysuits, cotton pajamas, shampoo for lice, Nylon sheet, woolen blanket, cotton blanket, socks, sponge for the baby

## c. About Women Now for Development & Past Emergency Responses

Women Now for Development began in 2012 as a grassroots initiative committed to the pursuit of a just democracy in Syria. WND has grown into an organisation with a team of 195 people (110 of whom operate from exile, including 35 internally displaced women in NWS), supporting thousands of women, girls, and their communities a year. WND operates offices in Germany, France, Turkey, Syria, and Lebanon and *Women and Girl Safe Spaces* in Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey. As a feminist organisation, WND's work is rights-based agenda setting, advocacy, and programmatic delivery in Syria, Lebanon, and abroad. WND's programs encompass MHPSS, educational and vocational training, community mobilisation initiatives, feminist knowledge production, supporting women's access to justice and accountability, and strengthening and reinforcing women's leadership.

WND began in the context of the Syrian uprisings against dictatorship. While the organisation's mandate is not humanitarian response, it has necessarily organised around emergencies that impacted its team, community, and infrastructure for years. Many members of the WND team are survivors of detainment, siege, forcible displacement, bombardment and chemical attacks. WND has responded to at least four forcible displacements of our team over the years (Daraya-Eastern Ghouta-Idlib twice).

Before the forced displacement of the WND team in 2016, WND had not run a large-scale emergency response but was practised at managing the safety and support of its team in the context of displacement and the horrors of conflict. Over time, the organisation began implementing routine emergency response protocol in its day-to-day operations, for example, a duty of care that is presented to donors to cover emergency response costs for the team in cases of displacement or conflict related crisis. This practice was institutionalised after 2016, when a donor refused to pay the salary of a colleague



to her family after the colleague was killed with her daughter during a bombardment. The donor claimed the family was not "vetted" and therefore ineligible to receive the money. In 2018 in response to a crisis in Ghouta, some humanitarian donors refused to reallocate available and underspent budget to cover team displacement and evacuation costs. In addition, WND institutionalised several emergency reflexes to be ready for emergencies - including regularly updating the team contact list and information in case of emergency. WND's emergency response approach also includes advocacy as in the case of Daraya (see [Annex A](#)), documenting women's stories to amplify their voices, and centering PSS support. For more information about past WND's emergency and crisis responses please see Annex A.

In the process of responding to multiple crises of displacement, Women Now learned that managing a crisis is about preparation, as well as approach: the ability to think under pressure, manage resources and human capacity, and how to take difficult decisions with speed. This skillset and lived experience deeply informed and shaped the 2023 earthquake response. Specifically, the importance of taking care of the team - and what care is supportive in the midst of a complex crisis (i.e. cash & evacuation support) as well as the logistics of the provision of accessible PSS services. Team care and PSS sessions were key components of the earthquake response.



## d. Learning Paper Methodology

### i. Guiding Questions

The learning paper process and methodology sought to answer five guiding questions:

- i. What is a feminist crisis response in the context of Women Now for Development's work and community?
- ii. Did the adopted approach consider the feminist priorities and was it really gender sensitive?
- iii. What difference/added value can the feminist response bring? To what extent could we address it?
- iv. What could have been done better or what should have been done to achieve a feminist and gender sensitive response?
- v. What were the best taken measures and actions to ensure fulfilling a gender and context sensitive response?

### ii. Process + Data Sources

The WND learning paper on the 2023 feminist earthquake response was in itself a practice of living feminist values of reflexivity, while creating space for the WND team who led the response to reflect, digest, and have space for catharsis.

The learning paper followed the below process:

Research   Oct - Dec 2023	Analysis   Dec 2023 - Jan 2024	Validation   Jan 2024
<p><b>5 focus group discussions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● 2 with WND team in Europe - 12 participants</li><li>● 1 with Syria &amp; Turkey team - 10 participants</li><li>● 1 with PSS providers - 9 participants</li><li>● 1 with women-led initiatives in Syria - 15 participants</li></ul> <p><b>2 surveys:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● 1 donor survey - 7 respondents</li><li>● 1 team survey - 19 respondents</li></ul> <p><b>Literature review:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● 31 internal documents reviewed ranging team notes to donor reports to MEAL documents to board reports</li><li>● 13 external documents</li></ul>	<p>Analysis was primarily qualitative and story-based - tracking patterns and themes within specific stakeholder conversations.</p> <p>Once data had been coded by stakeholder, data was cross coded to compare areas of convergence / divergence across stakeholders. Findings + Lessons Learned were taken from here.</p> <p>A small quantitative analysis was done based on team survey responses and internal MEAL reports.</p>	<p>In January 2024, two validation workshops were held with the WND team.</p> <p>One validation workshop was with senior leadership of WND.</p> <p>The second validation workshop was open to the team that contributed to the learning process. 12 people participated in the final validation workshop.</p>

### iii. Limitations + Constraints

While significant effort was taken for the learning process to be inclusive and representative, there are limitations that existed in the process that are important to name and account for.

1. No direct conversations with community members that received PSS support or women's emergency relief kits / infant kits.

All community-level feedback was taken from three MEAL reports prepared during WND site visits between March - November 2023. This was an intentional decision. The learning paper team decided that the potential risk of exposing community members to stress by asking them to re-share their stories, coupled with the logistical and security challenges of interviewing additional community members with the deteriorating security situation in NWS, outweighed the value of speaking with community members again. Furthermore, some key community groups were no longer accessible to the WND team, such as those in temporary shelters.

2. Arabic to English translations... things always get lost in translation.

The WND team operates in Arabic and English, and much written documentation happens in Arabic. One member of the two-member team who worked on this project - the external consultant - does not speak or read Arabic. While translators were present throughout the process, it is inevitable that some nuances of language and meaning are shifted in the process of translation.

3. The professionalised context of this learning process

While every effort was made to create multiple feedback avenues for WND team members as part of this process, this research was still held in the context of a professionalised space - where people's livelihoods and financial stability is dependent on their job. To mitigate this - an outside consultant was brought in who worked closely with WND's MEAL Manager. The status of being a third-party researcher can have benefits in terms of creating a "neutral" listener but also downsides in that there was no established foundation of trust for the team to fall back on. To balance this, the study was managed and co-facilitated by WND's MEAL Manager who brought methodological and technical input, critical context, grounding, and familiarity of the response to the process.

4. A lack of responses to our donor survey from "traditional" humanitarian and philanthropic donors

While the donor survey was shared with every donor that supported the response (18 in total) - we exclusively received responses from feminist and women's rights philanthropic spaces; institutions that are actively engaged in supporting self-led, rights-based, gender justice work. This means that the donor survey findings are from the perspective of feminist donors and women's funds. It also raises additional questions about why traditional humanitarian and philanthropic institutions chose not to respond to the survey.

## e. Overview of the Syrian context: Feminist movement in exile & compounding crises

*"I want to add that what I feel is missing is to link the outcomes of the disaster with the political situation in Syria... We can't control disasters, but we can control conflict / weapon trade etc ...What happened in our response has become difficult because of the war... We aren't a state with a good capacity like Turkey... We are still facing long-term armed and violent conflict"*

*Validation workshop participant.*

The WND earthquake response in Syria took place against a backdrop of enormous, interlocking complexity. Ongoing conflict, a complete lack of a functioning state, regional anti-Syrian / anti-immigrant sentiments, and a deeply patriarchal and conservative context that actively pushes back against women-led organising. All of these factors contribute to an environment that takes deep contextualised knowledge to successfully navigate and respond to.

### i. Northwest Syria:

For nearly 13 years, Syria has been in conflict. The brutal, ongoing war has resulted in the forced displacement of 6.9 million people internally, and 5.4 million people around the world<sup>7</sup>. The Syrian government now controls approximately 70% of the country with military backing from Iran and Russia. Kurdish controlled areas in Northeast Syria are under autonomous self-administration, though they face regular attack by Turkey, which now controls swaths of Syria near the Turkish border. Northwest Syria (NWS), where Women Now runs a majority of its programming, is under control of Hayaat Tahrir Alsham (HTS) and Turkish authorities. NWS is still under active conflict fed by Syrian government forces, militias, extremist Islamist groups, and geo-political powers like Israel, Iran, and Russia.

Humanitarian conditions continue to deteriorate in northwest Syria due to ongoing hostilities. As of the end of 2023, 90% of families are living below the poverty line<sup>8</sup> and the civilian unemployment rate is 88.48%. A worsening economic crisis was further amplified by the damage and displacement from the February earthquakes. In Northwest Syria alone, camps and self-settled sites host 1.9 million IDPs; a majority of whom are women and children particularly vulnerable to many risks including gender-based violence.

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7. Conflict in Syria | Global Conflict Tracker." Council on Foreign Relations, February 13, 2024. <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-syria>.

8. "Briefers Stress to Security Council Syria's Worsening Situation Needs Fully Funded Humanitarian Response Plan, 12-Month Extension of Cross-Border Aid Mechanism | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases." United Nations, June 29, 2023. <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15339.doc.htm>

Women in NWS face a number of challenges: the normalisation of violence, including domestic violence, early marriage, lack of access to reproductive rights and sexual health and lack of control over decisions on pregnancy and childbirth. Furthermore, the absence of women's shelters and extremely limited access to justice through courts (formal) or local mediation (informal) result in violations of their rights under personal status laws (custody and divorce and forced abandonment of their rights).

## **ii. Turkey:**

The area impacted by the February earthquake sits at the heart of the Syrian community in Turkey. UNHCR estimates that 1.7 million Syrians in Turkey were impacted by the earthquake. Gaziantep - located 33 km / 20 miles from the epicentre of the first quake - is a hub for Syrian refugees and international and regional aid organisations, including WND. Syrian refugees in Turkey are registered under a Temporary Protection regulation that grants access to healthcare and education while placing restrictions on movement. The severity of the damage to infrastructure and housing forced the Turkish government to waive the need for a temporary protection permit for those in impacted regions<sup>9</sup>. The 90-day window allowed Syrians that could afford to seek shelter in less affected areas some of their first opportunities to move around the country. With this additional opportunity for movement came experiences of racism: bus companies refusing to transport Syrian community members to other places, people refusing to rent houses to Syrians, even those who hold Turkish citizenship.

## **iii. The state of Syrian women-led initiatives:**

Women-led initiatives in Syria face a myriad of structural challenges to their existence: inability to register organisations due to cost and restrictions by local authorities; extremely limited access to sustainable funding streams due to donor restrictions and localised bureaucracy; and restricted and limited mobility of movement for women across Northwest Syria which complexifies mobilisation and outreach efforts. Existentially, the reliance on donors in deeply unequal power arrangements leaves ample opportunities for the organisations of resistance and distortion of local agendas<sup>10</sup>.

Due to the conflict, and the challenges mentioned above, many feminist and women's rights organisations working on Northern Syria are now located outside of Syria - straddling the space between new centres of Syrian diasporic life (Istanbul, Gaziantep, Beirut, Berlin, Paris) and the on-going conflict at home. WND - and other Syrian feminist orgs operating in exile - continue to provide alternative systems to violence and continue to improve women's lives. Working on highly contested issues both socially and politically, they are enacting the most foundational form of care work: advocating and holding space for women's rights in a context where they are not a priority for anyone.

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9. Syrians were still required to register and obtain a travel permit once they had arrived in safe districts across the country.

10. Feminist and Women's Rights Organisations in Syria: Opportunities and Challenges. Women Now for Development, Global Fund for Women, Impact Civil Society Research & Development, August 2020. <https://women-now.org/wp-content/uploads/Feminist-and-Womens-Organisations-in-Syria-Challenges-and-Opportunities.pdf>



Such persistence in the face of enormous state, social, and structural pushback has a direct toll on individual and organisational wellbeing. Many Syrian feminist activists - inside of Syria and in exile - are survivors of multiple atrocities, mass human rights violations and have faced direct persecution for their work on women's rights. They face immense, multi-dimensional burnout from years of providing public sector care and human rights services. Their burnout is the result of compassion fatigue, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the constant feeling of needing to provide care to less advantaged members of the Syrian community, and the complexity of responding to nearly 13 years of complex crisis. Beyond their activism, feminist activists must balance caregiving responsibilities at home and for those displaced or in processes of exile and navigate building a new life away from home. It is not an exaggeration to say that the sustainability - and the very existence - of a feminist and women's rights ecosystem in Syria and in exile is under threat of collapsing.



## B. Towards a Syrian Definition of a Feminist Humanitarian Response:

The humanitarian sector is historically bureaucratic, siloed, and highly susceptible to the political and geo-political whims of the Global North countries that lead its financing. The focus on gender equality in humanitarian sector financing is also extremely low<sup>11</sup>. As the Women's Refugee Commission explained in their 2022 report in collaboration with the Feminist Humanitarian Network and Quicksand:

"The formal humanitarian system is broken. Despite years of reform, it continues to privilege the values, interests, and worldviews of a small number of actors based in industrialised economies. Actors external to each crisis define what affected populations need, often displacing, rather than building on, existing systems and capacities. Programs are crafted in uniform and technical terms, with limited regard for the complexity of human needs or the disparate impacts of conflict on different social groups. Accountability of humanitarian agencies is largely upwards—toward donors, rather than toward the populations they are supposed to serve<sup>12</sup>."

These realities - coupled with the historic lack of consideration for gender differentials in response design and humanitarian leadership - has resulted in a decade of calls not just to reform the humanitarian system, but to entirely overhaul its approach. A feminist crisis response offers an alternative approach. Around the world women-led organisations and local groups advocate for groups otherwise ignored or undervalued. Achieving humanitarian localisation goals requires engaging and centering the leadership, knowledge, and experience of women-led groups.

Furthermore, at the heart of the calls for a feminist crisis response is systems change analysis that sees a glimmer of light in social and political breakdowns. In the midst of upheaval there is potential for shifts in economic, social, and political systems in ways that moves us towards a more equitable and just world.

WND - as a feminist organisation - designed our earthquake response with feminist values and the realities of gendered experiences of displacement and conflict at its heart. This approach came from clear political values of WND and its leadership, lived experiences of the gaps in the humanitarian response system, and an intuitive understanding of systems change. Over the course of the learning paper - through a series of focus group discussions, team and donor surveys, and literature reviews of external understanding and framings of a feminist crisis response, the WND team composed the following definition:

A feminist crisis response is one that centres and accounts for the diverse needs of vulnerable communities. It is contextually rooted and accountable to communities and seeks to transform and challenge gendered power differentials in its design - including in who leads the response. A feminist crisis response is explicitly political - challenging power hierarchies and structural inequality including in the communities that the response is unfolding in. Even while responding to immediate needs, a feminist response has an eye on long-term social transformation.

11. Official Development Assistance for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in 2020-21: A Snapshot . Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023. Official development assistance for gender equality and women's empowerment in 2020-21: A snapshot

12. Toward Feminist Place-Based Responses to Forced Displacement. Women's Refugee Commission, Feminist Humanitarian Network, Quicksand, March 22, 2022. <https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/research-resources/toward-feminist-place-based-responses-to-forced-displacement/>

## C. Meeting short-term needs, while imagining long-term horizons: the difference of a feminist humanitarian response

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Through the process of reflecting, evaluating, and learning from the WND earthquake response, WND identified eight key differences and value additions that come from a feminist crisis response. Findings marked with asterisks are preliminary and worthy of deeper exploration and further research.

1. Enacts practices of dignity, agency, and consent
2. Alleviates loneliness and desolation felt by the WND team impacted by the earthquakes
3. Short-term mitigation of the impacts of vicarious trauma\*\*
4. Meets the emergency response needs of women and children
5. Invests in the resilience of local women-led organising
6. Catalyses shifts in society's perception of women\*\*
7. Models how to live humanitarian rhetoric in practice: flexibility, localisation, and solidarity with local groups
8. Mitigates the risks and occurrences of exploitation and sexual violence in crisis

### a. Enacts practices of dignity, agency, and consent

At the heart of a feminist response is the possibility that the disruption of a crisis can make space for new ways of being and working. A feminist response - by definition - requires practices that are accountable to the community it serves. By building a feminist response that values and centres feedback from people receiving services, WND modelled larger social values such as dignity, agency, and consent, values that are critical to good governance practices and democracy. In the context of Syria, where decades of dictatorship, conflict, and militarisation has eroded any sense of civic trust in institutions, it is especially essential to model response designs that practise larger social values.

The WND team's MEAL team focused on accountability as a core part of its evaluation approach. Two examples include: 1) complaint mechanisms for recipients of the emergency response kits for women & infant kits and 2) site visits to distribution locations that included individual interviews with recipients and individual follow-up on complaints.

Women could register complaints via Facebook, WhatsApp, email, a physical complaints box, and again during post distribution survey and interviews. How to register complaints was shared with women as they registered for the emergency response kits for women and infant kits. Over the course of the distribution process, WND used the feedback received during MEAL site visits to refine the accessibility of the complaint mechanisms further.

For example, in the 2nd round of distribution - only 43% of interviewees reported that they knew how to submit a complaint or suggestion<sup>13</sup>. In response to this, the WND team changed how they shared information about complaint / suggestion mechanisms for future rounds. In round 3 & 4, in addition to explaining complaint mechanism options during registration, a slip of paper containing information about complaint mechanisms was placed in each kit. This significantly increased the percentage of people who reported knowing how to make a complaint or suggestion. In the post-emergency response kits for women kit distribution survey in Idlib, 86% of women interviewed reported that they knew how to submit complaint / feedback. 70% of interviewed women reported that they felt the instructions on how to submit complaint / feedback were clear<sup>14</sup>.

By building in feedback loops that were actively followed up on, and making changes accordingly, WND modelled a form of responsive governance accountable to the communities it was serving.

## **b. alleviate loneliness and desolation felt by the WND team impacted by the earthquake.**

*"... I was in a very bad stage of my life. The death of my mother and then the earthquake. Women  
Now were not only supportive but were like a warm embrace for me."*

*member of Turkey team that received financial & PSS assistance.*

The earthquake - and the displacement surrounding it - is still present in the lives and psyches of WND team members who lived in impacted areas. However, the support and attentiveness of the WND team in caring for their team was reported as being a key source of support in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. It mattered that people outside of the earthquake zone cared deeply not just about their survival, but about their capacity for healing and wellness.

The relatively small size of the WND team allowed for tailored emergency assistance that met the reality of the people that needed support. However, rather than dismissing the precision of the WND response as untenable at scale, it serves as an example of what a contextualised response can look like and why it is so critical to ensure resources get into the hands of locally based groups deeply rooted in their own context.

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13. Following the 2nd round of emergency response kits for women and infant kit distribution, the WND MEAL team conducted interviews with 88 women who received emergency response kits for women about their experience of the process. 38 women out of the 88 interviewed women knew how to submit a complaint or suggestions. 50 other women did not know.

14. Following the 3rd round of emergency response kits for women and infant kit distribution in Idlib, 123 women were interviewed out of the 498 kits distributed.

c. Short-term mitigation of the impacts of vicarious trauma\*\*



*"There was a lot of team support ... if a person was down, we would say relax for a bit, we'll take over"*

*Europe WND Team FGD participant.*

*"As a team, we were able from the first hours of the disaster to help the team and their families... We were able to hear their voices and talk to them on video once they were in a safe place. I was very proud of the team because we were all working together, thinking together, and taking care of each other during this difficult period. Is this something that I was proud to have been a part of and will continue to be proud of throughout my life."*

*Europe WND Team FGD participant.*

Vicarious trauma - sometimes referred to as secondary trauma - is the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms through repeated exposure to the trauma of others. It is rampant in humanitarian spaces and hugely connected to larger systemic burnout. Research on vicarious trauma mitigation for researchers working on gender-based violence, has demonstrated that a safeguarding practice is finding ways for research to be turned into action - either in policy shifts or implemented programming<sup>15</sup>. Furthermore, finding spaces where your experience is understood without having to be explained, is also supportive for caregivers responding to traumatic contexts.

The WND Team in Europe may have been physically safe from the earthquake but they were grappling with complex feelings from the guilt of being safe and - for some - the loss of loved ones. Working on the earthquake response as part of a tight-knit team proved to be an important strategy for coping with the devastation. During the focus group discussion with the Europe team, nearly every team member spoke of how a strong sense of teamwork and the community that surrounded them was critical for them. It was an area both of personal pride, and something that WND as an institution should feel proud of.

The team spoke of the organic ways in which they stepped in and shared the burden of the response - especially in the initial days when the work was constant and extremely fast-paced. Furthermore, learning from nearly 13 years of providing care in the context of conflict, WND as an institution arranged group PSS sessions (and individual sessions when desired) to further support the team.

However, as the urgency of the immediate emergency response eased, and the longer-term planning and regular programming work re-started, the WND team reported deeper feelings of exhaustion. As one team member in Europe explained during the final validation workshop "I don't know if that feeling [teamwork] continued after the first 2 months ... people had to go back [to work] and that was different.. we function better under those circumstances, when there is a catastrophe happening and this realisation was sad... "

Despite the tremendous collective care the WND team in Europe demonstrated for each other, there remains an urgent need to support groups operating in complex crises to develop contextualised care and coping strategies to ensure their resilience and sustainability along with large-scale systemic overhauls that lessen the burdens they are forced to carry.

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15. Guidelines for the prevention and management of vicarious trauma among researchers of sexual and intimate partner violence. (2015). Sexual Violence Research Initiative. Pretoria: South Africa. <https://www.svri.org/sites/default/files/attachments/2016-06-02/SVRIVTguidelines.pdf>

## d. Gender-sensitive emergency response: meeting actual humanitarian needs

Humanitarian assistance is not historically designed to end a need, but rather to stabilise and meet basic requirements until a crisis subsides and broader social systems can begin to function again. This is a foundational problem for the protracted crises of the 21st century. UNHCR estimates that for the 16.1 million people under its mandate, refugees spend an average of 20 years in exile<sup>16</sup>. However, as the WND response demonstrates, a feminist humanitarian response recognises that there are different needs at different phases of the response - and that includes basic hygiene, sanitation, and household supplies.

Over the course of the earthquake response, WND distributed 1,653 emergency response kits for women kits and 145 infant kits to women and girls in displaced people's camps outside of Aleppo and Idlib. Each emergency response kit for women was designed to serve two women and girls over the age of 13 and the needs of their family. The contents of the kit aimed to meet the basic hygiene needs of women (i.e. menstrual products) as well as the basic household sanitation needs of a family (i.e. soap and washing powder) for one to two months. By focusing on both the needs of women and their families, WND was seeking to demonstrate that the wellness of the family was an integral part of individual wellness. Infant kits were designed for the needs of babies under two years.

The emergency response kits for women were largely well-received and found to contain the items that women needed. Follow up MEAL activities interviewed 425 women across two districts. 73% of respondents (377) reported being completely satisfied with the quality of the contents.

In addition to focusing on the quality of the kits, the WND team focused extensively on the experience of receiving the kits. Distribution sites were designed to be organised, with clear communication and feedback loops, and as comfortable as possible (including basic necessities such as shade and water). The amount of time it took people to receive their kits - and their perception of the wait time - were critical criteria for the WND team in evaluating the success of the distribution process and this attention to detail paid off. Out of the 425 women interviewed about their experience, 87% reported that the wait time was not too long. 12% reported that the wait time was too long and stressful.

Furthermore, PSS sessions both for women were organised around the kit distribution. Simultaneously, there were recreational activities for children to keep them entertained and engaged during the distribution & PSS sessions and provide reassurance and peace of mind to mothers.

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16. About UNHCR. Accessed January 2024. <https://www.unhcr.org/us/introduction#:~:text=More%20than%20half%20are%20children,a%20person%27s%20productive%20working%20years>

## e. Investing in the resilience of women-led organising

*“... I hope Women Now will continue to support initiatives and associations working on the ground... especially during times of crises that we are experiencing within our regions due to double marginalization and neglect of the role of women in society.”*

*Women-Led Initiative FGD participant*

Even before the earthquake in Northwest Syria, women-led initiatives operated in a highly-sensitive context with significant social pushback and extremely limited access to funds. The earthquake further destabilised the efforts of women-led initiatives (WLI) - as they struggled to care for their teams, themselves, their communities, while continuing their operations, and rebuilding.

In recognition of this, all phases of the earthquake response focused on investing in the resilience of women-led initiatives across the region. In phase 1, 77 team members of women-led initiatives who were severely impacted by the earthquake received emergency cash assistance. This allowed WLIs to stabilise and care for their teams in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. In partnership with 15 women-led initiatives in Syria and 1 in Turkey, WND provided grants<sup>17</sup>, technical & capacity training, and PSS and wellness offerings. The groups WND supported worked on a range of topics - from vocational training for women to digital security training.

During the WLI focus group discussion, initiatives shared gratitude for the investments in them from WND. There was also significant interest - and need - in further technical & financial support beyond the earthquake response. WLIs also shared that they wanted more opportunities for exchange *between* WLIs . Worth mentioning, WND aims at creating this space for exchange of learning and knowledge between the partner WLIs and it indeed has such spaces under other non-emergency programs.. A participant in the WLIs focus group discussion explained: “We want to know what services they are providing so we can provide better referrals. [We] want to make sure the financial support is really benefited from. We could have made referrals to the programs working on economic empowerment (for example). We need to understand all of the initiatives... to know what they are working on; this way we'll have more partnership, and we'll know the needs that are not covered... ”

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17. 15 WLIs were supported with 5000\$ to respond to the earthquake in NWS. 7 out of the 15 WLO were supported with an additional 3000 \$ to respond to displacement in NWS after the deterioration of the security situation in Idlib in Oct + 1 initiative in Gaziantep, Turkey.



Finally, the escalating security situation around Idlib as a result of Russian and Syrian government airstrikes in October 2023 directly impacted 7 of the women-led initiatives working in partnership with WND, forcing them to relocate to the northern border. In some cases, offices were directly damaged in the fighting, resulting in a complete cessation of work. Miraculously, no one in the WND team / community was physically harmed. Many of the groups in the region have been forced to pause their regular programming to focus on the conflict response - including providing food and basic supplies for families who have (once again) lost their homes. The changing reality of the security situation resulted in a necessary pivot for the kind of support WLIs were receiving. WND had the capacity to re-allocate earthquake response money to support emergency operating grants for the escalating conflict. Furthermore, WND was able to continue PSS session provision for WLIs online, even amid the renewed violence.

**f. Catalyse shifts in society's perception of women.**

*"People's ideas about women are different, it's better because of their [women's] work; it's more productive... Fingers are not pointed to her: Where are you going? Why are you doing that? Women's presence is essential"*

*Women-Led Initiative FGD Participant*



During the WLI FGD, participants shared that they had observed a shift in women's perception in public spaces as a result of their participation and leadership in the earthquake response. While this is a hopeful observation, the experience of WND is that such shifts are often short-term and once the situation stabilises, there is a return to previous gender roles.

Further research on the relationship between short-term changes in gender perceptions in the aftermath of an emergency, and linkages to long-term changes in gendered power differentials is an area that deserves more research. Despite this, it felt important to uplift this observation by women-led initiatives since a core rationale for the importance of a feminist crisis response is that crisis can create opportunity for foundational shifts in gender norms in both public and private spaces. This is a research area that warrants additional investment.

**g. Model how to live humanitarian rhetoric in practice: flexibility, localisation, and solidarity with local groups.**

*"I learned more from WND's staff on how solidarity and feminism actually manifest in real life, away from theories and talk. They were honest, brave, and effective. All while realising how the earthquake affected staff directly in Syria and Turkey, and how it affected staff residing in Europe or other places differently."*

*Anonymous Donor, Donor Survey*

Effective solidarity requires deep and continuous introspection - and an important distinction for a feminist crisis response is the opportunity it creates for stakeholders, donors, and other humanitarian actors to reflect, adjust, and clarify their systems to ensure they are fit for purpose. Key to modelling words in practice is a commitment by donors and humanitarian actors to share risk, to make commitments that push the boundaries of how existing systems operate, and when necessary, change them entirely.

WND's team had no option but to figure out how to run an effective and accountable crisis response - the disaster was deeply personal. A challenge of enacting solidarity for those less impacted by a crisis is the possibility of pulling back or out too soon, of getting distracted with other work. A feminist crisis response, in its design and expectations of donors, requires commitment. A key distinction of a feminist crisis response is the level of accountability required of all stakeholders - donors, INGOs, governments, and humanitarian partners alike.

## h. Mitigates the risks and occurrences of exploitation and sexual violence in crisis

Due to the nature of our work, the WND team was well aware that disasters are too often accompanied by violence and exploitation of affected populations. This awareness, coupled with our ongoing investments in the education and training of the Women Now team on gender-based violence and protection meant that the response team considered the threat and risk of sexual exploitation and violence as a core part of the response design. The centralisation of this knowledge - coupled with the team's individual awareness of these risks - resulted in a response free from violence and exploitation. This speaks to the importance of centering women-led organisations that are well-trained and sensitised to the risks of gender-based violence and exploitation in crisis response as a strategy to reduce the incidence and prevalence of exploitation and violence.



## **D. Lessons Learned: Best actions taken & areas of growth and change.**

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### **a. What were the best taken measures and actions to ensure fulfilling a gender and context sensitive response?**

The learning process resulted in four takeaways on best practices to ensure a gender and context sensitive response.

- i. A response that accounted for short term, midterm, and long-term stages and needs.
- ii. Ongoing MEAL evaluations & site visits throughout the response.
- iii. Caring for the carers
- iv. An internal, post response learning and reflection process

#### **i. A response that accounted for short term, midterm, and long-term stages and needs.**

By creating a response that recognised the shifting needs and priorities of various stakeholders WND was able to meet a wide, yet specific set of needs based on organisational strengths and relationships.

By focusing on internal capacity - including the wellness of the WND team - the organisation recognised boundaries in its capacity and acted accordingly. Focusing on the safety of the team supported regular programming to return in a way that was sustainable and consistent.

It is important to note that an ongoing discussion is underway at WND about the politics of asking people to return to work after the initial emergency response phase. The "right" answer is often deeply individual. For some team members in Turkey and Syria, returning to work allowed for a sense of continuity and mitigated feelings of helplessness. For others, especially those in PSS roles, there remains serious questions about the ethics of having people in the midst of their own trauma supporting others with theirs.

#### **ii. Ongoing MEAL evaluations & site visits throughout the response**

Ensuring ongoing MEAL evaluations and site visits through the response provided multiple real time feedback loops. It allowed the WND team to understand the experience of communities receiving relief while adjusting and adapting processes to be more efficient, dignified, and supportive for communities.

Furthermore, it resulted in WND having a robust store of quantitative and qualitative data to support internal learning and reflection as part of this process. This strong source of institutional knowledge also serves as a knowledge bank critical to guiding and shaping the organisation's next steps and future responses.

### **iii. Caring for the carers**

By prioritising the needs of the WND teams in Turkey and Syria – before beginning any kind of community response, WND took care of its people, and lived its values. Furthermore, it recognised a practical capacity. If the team was unable to be secure and safe, caring for the broader community was impossible.

An important lesson for the WND team however is the heavy burden of the earthquake response on the team in Europe. As the Europe team was physically safe from the earthquake and dedicated to supporting the response and recovery, less emphasis was placed on caring for the team's wellbeing in a systematic way. This was unintentional. Given the physical distance of the team from the earthquake's impact area, the heavy emotional and mental burden of the response was less centred. Furthermore, there was an urgent demand for the EU team to continue organisational operations, especially as the teams in Syria and Turkey were limited in their response. The critical lesson here is that in caring for the carers, we cannot lose sight of caring for ourselves.

### **iv. An internal, post response learning and reflection process**

By focusing resources on understanding, documenting, and evaluating the efficacy of the earthquake response in a way that pulled in multiple stakeholders involved in its operation, WND built space for shared institutional memory, personal and collective reflection, catharsis, and cross-organisational learning. This was an important part of feminist praxis in action.

## b. What could have been done better to achieve a feminist and gender sensitive response?

*"We were in need of care + in need of money: international people would have been paid triple in recognition that this work burns people out and is very exhausting... we had to use the same resources. We were unable to take paid vacation because we couldn't use resources for our own operational costs"*

*Member of the EU team during FGD.*



- i. A pool of flexible funding that could be quickly re-allocated to meet immediate response needs
- ii. a disaster / emergency plan in place in advance. Ensure the entire team is trained on it in relation to their roles.
- iii. An existing shared understanding on the importance of MEAL across the entire WND team.
- iv. robust team wellness & care practices for during, and after, a response.
- v. More coordination opportunities for women-led initiatives to exchange skills, knowledge, and resources.
- vi. A pre-established system to rotate in volunteers / consultants to support the team when it was too exhausted.

### **i. A pool of flexible funding that could be quickly re-allocated to meet immediate response needs**

WND was fortunate to have a number of progressive, rights-focused, and feminist partners that supported the emergency fundraising appeals and deployed rapid funds to support the response. However, coordinating the appeals and getting the permission to move budgets around still took precious time and energy.

A learning for the team is to think differently about its budget and fundraising approach in an effort to build a pool of discretionary funds that can be quickly re-allocated internally, without impacting the overall financial sustainability or programming of the organisation.

### **ii. Have a pre-developed disaster and emergency plan. Ensure the entire team is trained on it in relation to their role.**

A clear learning is the need for WND to have a natural disaster emergency response and safety and security plan in place, that can be adapted to the specificity of the crisis. Thinking through questions around decision making, leadership, resource movement, wellness practices, duty of care, and risk management well in advance. This is a tangible area that donors or humanitarian orgs looking to support this work can resource.

### **iii. An existing shared understanding on the importance of MEAL across the entire WND team.**

One of the challenges of the response was developing standard operating procedures, internal communication, MEAL, and workflow systems, in real time, with such high-stakes, and an emotional and highly impacted team.

There is a need to invest time and energy in building a deeper, shared culture about what MEAL frameworks matter to WND and its work, and why MEAL is key to everyone's job. The WND MEAL team was very successful in running ongoing monitoring and accountability activities for almost the entire duration of the response. However not all team members understood why MEAL work was so important in the middle of a crisis.

Had the larger WND team shared the MEAL team's commitment to these learning and accountability processes, there could have been more ease with regards to MEAL activities. This is an area of reflection and learning for the organisation, and one of continued investment.

### **iv. Robust team wellness & care practices for during, and after, a response.**

The WND is exhausted, and WND as an organisation has changed. The cost of the response on the team, coupled with existing burn-out and exhaustion, has resulted in a context where the very wellness of the organisation is being questioned.

When you scale out the reality and the experience of WND across other Syrian women's rights groups, it becomes clear that without drastic shifts in external resourcing and support - as well as internal ways of working and care systems - the Syrian feminist movement is at risk of burning out. Progressive rights-based donors and feminist groups committed to cross-border solidarity and the future of the Syrian feminist movement should not overlook this existential threat.

**v. More coordination opportunities between the women-led initiatives**

During the focus group discussions, women-led initiatives shared a desire for more opportunities to exchange resources, skills, and experiences with each other. This is a practical and tangible programming change that can be made in future.

**vi. A pre-established system to rotate in volunteers / consultants to support the team when it was too exhausted.**

In multiple stakeholder conversations - with PSS providers, with the team in Europe - team members shared that people were interested in volunteering to support the WND earthquake response from afar. At the time, it was simply too exhausting to establish a system to onboard and delegate to volunteers or technical experts. However, this demonstrated interest in supporting WND demonstrates a pool of human resources that could be engaged to back up and support first responders.

By thinking through in advance what it might look like to hand over work - routine donor reporting, basic administrative work, or even technical services like PSS sessions for trained specialists - WND can establish a back-up system to ease the future pressure on their team.





## E. Recommendations & Action Items

### a. For Donors:

*“Donors must fund grassroots and feminist initiatives that are frontline responders during natural disasters. Supporting these initiatives, rather than the large international organisations, ensures that resources are efficiently directed towards gender-sensitive and community-driven responses.”*

*Anonymous Donor, WND Response Donor Survey*

An important distinction in context between the 2023 WND earthquake response and the 2018 emergency evacuation of the WND team in Eastern Ghouta was the number of progressive and feminist funders that fund our work. The trust, and flexibility directed towards WND was supportive, helpful, and enabled the response to happen. Their support speaks to why well-resourced feminist and women’s funds matter, and how effective feminist philanthropy can be.

However, it is extremely telling that while WND was able to secure the money needed to run its earthquake response design, the organisation continues to struggle to resource its regular programming and operations focused on long-term democracy building and leadership of Syrian women. So many team and financial resources went into the response that regular fundraising efforts were placed on hold, resulting in a fiscal crunch in 2024.

What follows below is a list of recommendations and action items directed to donors and interested in resourcing the resilience and sustainability of Syrian feminist groups & groups around the world operating in protracted complex crises.

#### 1. Expand risk thresholds, and share risks with partners

*“This is a shared responsibility. It’s not just about channelling money to us... They [donors] need to feel that they have a responsibility to this partnership & to human rights”*

*WND EU team member, Validation Workshop*

WND's work, every day, places the team at physical and emotional risk. The work of advocating for Syrian women's rights and filling the void that follows a total lack of public sector systems has come at the direct cost of the team's safety, wellness, and in some cases, ability to return home. Donors must re-examine the notion of risk and their institutional risk threshold, especially in relation to the risks their partners take daily. Tangible ways to do this is to build duty of care clauses and contingency allocations into grant contracts and reporting timelines. For example, donors funding groups operating in the context of long-term conflict, should build in emergency response contract clauses that allow resources to be shifted around, or at minimum, allow reporting deadlines to change in case of natural disaster, or unforeseen crisis.

## **2. Invest in training + emergency preparedness for all partners operating in complex crisis.**

*"For 12 years we've been in an armed conflict; no one from our international partners ever said we want to give you training for disasters... no one was trained or qualified enough to deal with natural disasters"*

*WND Team member, Focus Group Discussion*

After the earthquake, while working day and night to secure the safety of their team, WND colleagues found their inboxes full of advice on how to respond to an earthquake. While well-intentioned, it was poorly timed, and bad practice.

Donors have access to tools, capacity training, policy spaces, and a high-level understanding of the geopolitical landscape that can be inaccessible to local groups, or that they simply do not have the time or capacity to seek out. Donors have a responsibility to understand the context in which groups operate, and offer support and training accordingly, rather than merely offering tips in a mass email. Groups should not be under an obligation to say yes to this support, but they should know it is available as it aligns with their organisational priorities and needs.

## **3. Fund organisational wellness practices. Reflect a commitment to wellbeing in reporting timelines and grant processes.**

In addition to funding technical training and support, donors must fund wellness practices and innovations that allow collective care to be centred in organisational cultures and ways of working. In addition to funding such work, donors need to reflect this commitment to wellness in their reporting timelines and grant cycles. They must recognise that especially amid a known crisis response, reporting timelines may have to shift - and grant cycles may have to be extended - to meet the reality of the moment.

#### **4. Resource the years after the crisis, as willingly as you resourced the crisis response**

The WND earthquake response required a complete shift in internal operations - which naturally impacted the team's ability to carry out daily fundraising functions. The result of this has had a direct impact on the organisation's financial and operational sustainability in 2024. With full recognition that donors also face constraints and funding boundaries as well, another form of solidarity could be to automatically renew - or offer - core funding support the year following a crisis response. This offering would recognise the reality of operating in a complex crisis and mirror a core practice at the heart of feminist response: that even after the emergency response ends, long-term rebuilding is required. By ensuring groups operating in crisis have access to core funding even as the immediate crisis eases, donors are making a commitment to resourcing long-term sustainability in transformative ways.

#### **5. Syrian feminist groups in exile: a necessary safeguarding of rights-based work**

As discussed in the section on the realities of Syrian women-led organisations and feminist movements, an increasing amount of the Syrian feminist movement now operates from some form of geographic exile. The need for these organisations to register in exile is a direct result of the oppressive conditions imposed by the Syrian government and defacto authorities. Operating openly as human rights-based organizations would not only be impractical but also extremely dangerous for their members and supporters. Furthermore, registering outside of Syria is an adaptation to donor compliance requirements: Syria faces international sanctions and there is almost no direct channel to fund groups inside the countries. By registering in exile, feminist organizations can continue their vital work advocating for women's rights and promoting social change without fear of persecution or reprisal and with enhanced access to resources. The decision to operate from exile highlights the resilience and adaptability of civil society in the face of adversity. It is imperative that international donors fund Syrian human rights work both within Syria, and in exile. Recognising that registering and existence in exile is often a practical and necessary organisational safeguarding approach that allows otherwise criminalised work to continue.

#### **6. Fund research that further explores the relationship between feminist crisis response and the mitigation of sexual exploitation and violence during crisis**

As mentioned in the section about the distinctions of a feminist crisis response, the level of awareness held by the WND team on gender-based violence and sexual exploitation during a crisis resulted in violence prevention as a core organising principle of the WND response.

However, there is an opportunity to invest in developing an evidence base that further explores linkages between feminist crisis response approaches and reduced incidences of gender-based violence and exploitation in crisis. This linkage is critical both for mitigating violence and exploitation and for further making the case for why localised, women-led and feminist humanitarian response matters.

## **b. For Feminist and Humanitarian peer organisations working in contexts of complex crisis.**

### **1. Prepare a comprehensive emergency response, action plan, and accompanying organisational infrastructure**

Women Now had an existing emergency plan in place however, it did not include scoping and risk assessment for natural disasters. While it can feel extremely daunting to develop such a comprehensive plan, taking time to define and establish basic security and crisis response policies and mechanisms is key to protecting your work and your team. This includes thinking through the money movement infrastructure (what happens if the banks are closed?) as well as the communication channels needed to mobilise effectively in a crisis. Seek out opportunities to preventatively train and prepare your team for complex crises in advance.

Actionable points for the WND team include 1) maintaining a routinely updated emergency contact list for the team 2) keeping a pool of core, flexible resources specifically for emergencies 3) establishing a duty of care policy and speaking to donors about why it is a shared responsibility to care for your team and 4) keeping records and key documents secure in both digital and physical spaces.

### **2. Take time to develop internal care strategies and team relationship building as a strategy for organisational sustainability.**

We are deeply aware that self and collective care in the midst of a crisis, while operating on limited budgets, can seem nearly offensive. We know intimately how impossible it can feel to slow-down enough to rest or recover. Unfortunately, an inescapable lesson for WND as a result of the response is that in whatever form it looks like - finding ways to care for and centre the wellness of your team in your work, in informal and informal ways, is non-negotiable maintenance work, especially in crisis.

This is an area of continued growth for the organisation but some examples of how WND centres care for its team structurally includes:

- Committing budget for individual PSS sessions
- 4 day working weeks.
- Flexibility in working from home / remotely.
- Group / team PSS sessions.

### **3. For Feminist Peer Orgs: Focus on developing a network of feminist and women's rights donors that care to understand your work and context**

A critical difference between the WND earthquake response and previous emergency responses was the existence of strong relationships with donors willing and able to shift resources around to resource the earthquake response. This shift in the composition of our donors took years of

intentional cultivation by the Women Now team. Investing in relationship building with feminist donors and women's funds extends beyond the day-to-day access to core, flexible funding. It serves as a potential safety net that can be deployed in incidences of profound emergency and crisis.

#### **4. For Non-Feminist Humanitarian Orgs: Familiarise yourself with the definition of a feminist response and what these principals look like in the context of your work.**

For organisations that do not identify as a humanitarian organisation, taking time to understand the nuance and value of a feminist approach to humanitarian response is a key next step in operationalizing gender-sensitive responses that forefront the vision of a gender equitable society.

### **c. For Syrian women-led initiatives**

#### **1. Focus on building self-led coordination networks.**

During the women-led initiative focus group discussion, participants repeatedly shared that they wished they had a better sense of the work that others were doing, and more mechanisms to coordinate and exchange resources. WND is happy to do our part in facilitating this, but we also strongly encourage groups to familiarise themselves with the work happening around you, and to develop self-led mechanisms to coordinate resources, activities, and exchanges. WND can be part of this ecosystem, but necessarily should not be doing such movement building alone.

By seeing organisations around you as resources for support - and not competition - there is an increased opportunity to build more resilient and effective coordination mechanisms, more sensitive support systems, and in-the long term, shifts in the very power of women-led work in Syria.

#### **2. Self-assess your capacity and resources and tailor your work accordingly.**

What is your team great at? What internal skills does your team hold on an individual and shared level? What are the gaps in what you know? What do you want to learn? By taking time to assess individual and collective capacities your team can develop a greater sense of the internal resources. Furthermore, by knowing your strengths (and weaknesses) when a crisis or challenge arises, you will more easily know what support you need and can tailor your outreach accordingly.

On a day-to-day level, knowing your strengths and weaknesses, and incorporating this in how you design your programming and interventions, will allow for stronger and more sustainable programming work.

### **3. Take care of your team and take care of each other.**

Finding ways to take care of your team, even in situations of enhanced stress and crisis, is essential to sustainable and long-lasting work, and a lesson that has been hard for us at Women Now to learn. In whatever form it takes - taking time for team members to get to know each other more fully, lunch outings or shared lunches, taking a team day off, offering flexibility about working from home - can help foster the internal systems and relationships to make your work more sustainable.

Simultaneously, as stronger networks and coordinating systems are built between other women-led initiatives, think about how you can best support each other. You are each other's best resource for care and resilience.

### **4. Advocate for your needs: practise speaking up at the regional and the international level.**

Your voice and experience is deeply valuable. We need more and more in-country Syrian women-led initiatives taking space at international and regional forums. We encourage groups to advocate for their needs, including with us, and to consider ways in which we can create more in-roads to influential advocacy spaces. As part of a commitment to external advocacy, take time to self-assess your capacity and ensure close coordination with other WLIs to ensure strong, coherent, and consistent messaging.

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