

Feminist Crisis Response to Natural Disasters in Complex Crisis

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



Read the entire paper here.

Women Now
For Development
النساء الآن للتنمية



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Context

Setting brief context for WND's work & the earthquake response

Response Timeline

Illustrated timeline of the crisis response

Meeting short-term needs, while imagining long-term horizons:

The difference of a feminist humanitarian response

Recommendations

Donors + humanitarian agencies
Feminist peer organisations
Syrian civil society

Women Now for Development post the crisis response

How women now is shifting its operational model to reflect the reality of complex crisis and the needs of the syrian feminist movement feminist movement

About Women Now: Women Now for Development is a collective of four feminist organizations led by Syrian women. In 2012, Women Now began as a grassroots initiative committed to the pursuit of a just democracy in Syria. Today, Women Now works collaboratively on rights-based agenda setting, advocacy, and programmatic delivery in Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and the EU utilizing participatory and transformative methods to empower women and girls in their leadership roles. Women Now contributes to building Syrian women-led/feminist movements and enriching the body of feminist knowledge production and advocacy nationally, regionally, and globally, striving towards a more just and democratic society.

CREDITS

Document by Women Now for Development © 2024

Written by Cassie Denbow

Research Management by Batoul ALEITA

Editing, thought-leadership, and contextualisation by

Batoul Aleita, Lubna Kanawati

Proofreading by Victoria Lupton

Designed + Illustrated by Pearl D'Souza

Resourcing partners - Global Fund for Women + Equality Fund

CONTEXT SETTING

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

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, conflict, and exacerbated by the climate crisis.

This narrative report documents an internal reflection and learning process at Women Now for Development on their feminist earthquake response. It seeks to contribute to ongoing transnational localisation and humanitarian discourse by defining a contextualised concept of feminist crisis response. Finally, it shares Women Now's experience with peer organizations, donors, governments, and humanitarian agencies looking for evidence of the impact, power, and importance of a localised feminist crisis response.

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.

TIMELINE OF THE WOMEN NOW FEMINIST CRISIS RESPONSE

WND Team in Syria and Turkey

Response for Community

Local Women Led Initiatives

International Community

PHASE 1

Emergency Evacuation & Resettlement of Women Now Team + Families

Rebuild & re-open women's shelters

Rebuilding cash assistance for 77 team members of local women-led initiatives

Online advocacy campaign "Disasters Knows No Borders"

PHASE 2

Continued support for heavily impacted Women Now team members

PSS Support - Individual & Group

Distribution of 1,653 emergency relief kits for women in IDP camps

Re-start Women Now programming

PSS Support

Capacity and Technical Support

Emergency response grants to 15 women-led initiatives

PHASE 3

Ongoing PSS Support - Individual & Group

Distribution of 145 infant kits in IDP camps

Group PSS support for women and children in IDP camps

Reactivating women and girls safe spaces

Ongoing PSS Support

Ongoing Capacity and Technical Support

16 days of activism against gender-based violence: campaign on risks of sexual exploitation in the midst of crisis

MEETING SHORT-TERM NEEDS, WHILE IMAGINING LONG-TERM HORIZONS: THE DIFFERENCE OF A FEMINIST HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

Examples of how feminist crisis response differ from standard humanitarian response:

Enact practices of dignity, agency, and consent

A feminist response - by definition - requires practices that are accountable to the community it serves. By building a response that values and centers feedback from people receiving services, the response can model larger social values such as dignity, agency, and consent, values that are critical to good governance practices, democracy, and feminist leadership.

Alleviates loneliness and desolation felt by the WND team impacted by the earthquakes

The earthquake - and the displacement surrounding it - is still present in the lives and psyches of impacted Women Now team members. However, the support and attentiveness of Women Now in caring for their team was reported as being a key source of support in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake.

Short-term mitigation of the impacts of vicarious trauma**

Working on the earthquake response as part of a tight-knit team proved to be an important coping strategy for the devastation. Resourcing groups operating in complex crises to develop and implement contextualised care strategies along with large-scale systemic shifts that lessen the burdens localised groups are forced to carry must be a key localisation priority.

Gender-sensitive emergency response: meeting actual humanitarian needs

A feminist humanitarian response recognises that there are different needs at different phases of the response and the response is designed accordingly.

Invests in the resilience of local women-led organising

The earthquake destabilized the efforts of women-led initiatives (WLI) in Northwest Syria- as they worked to care for their teams, themselves, their communities, while continuing their operations, and rebuilding. All phases of the earthquake response focused on investing in the resilience of women-led initiatives across the region through financial and technical support.

Catalyses shifts in society's perception of women **

Post earthquake, shifts in women's access and perception to public spaces were reported. Unfortunately, Women Now has experienced that such changes are short term and revert back as the crisis stabilizes. 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.

Models how to live humanitarian rhetoric in practice: flexibility, localisation, and solidarity with local groups

Key to modeling words in practice is a commitment by donors and humanitarian actors to share risk with local partners, to make commitments that push the boundaries of how existing systems operate, and when necessary, change ineffective systems entirely.

Mitigates the risks and occurrences of exploitation and sexual violence in crisis:

It is critical to center women-led organizations that are well-trained and sensitized 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.



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.

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR DONORS

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

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

FOR PEER ORGANISATIONS

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

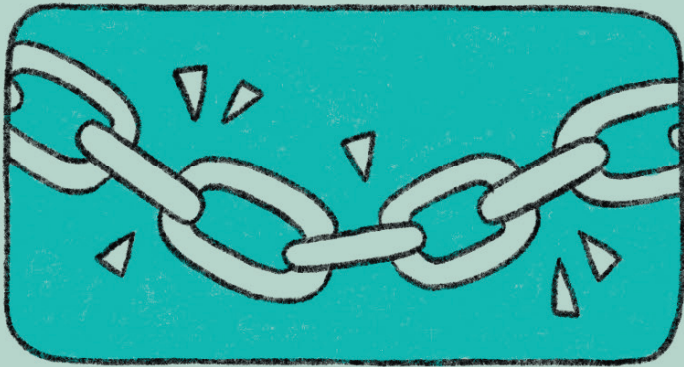
- Prepare a comprehensive emergency response, action plan, and accompanying organisational infrastructure
- Take time to develop internal care strategies and team relationship building as a strategy for organisational sustainability
- For Feminist Peer Orgs: Focus on developing a network of feminist and women's rights donors that care to understand your work and context
- 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 SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY

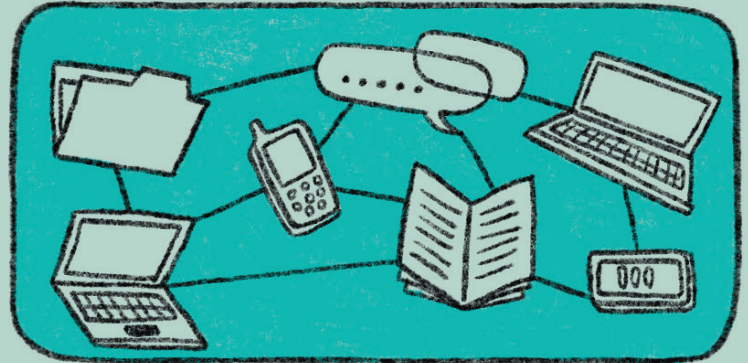
Finally, to the Syrian women-led initiatives - both those we already work with and don't yet know - we see and honour your work and encourage the following:

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

SHIFTING LANDSCAPES, RESPONSIVE ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURES: WOMEN NOW FOR DEVELOPMENT 2024-2028



Guided by strong feminist principles, integrated into every aspect of programming, Women Now staff are activists at their core. Despite challenges such as the ongoing bombings, a weak economy and inflation, the 2023 Earthquake, and shrinking operational spaces, the demand for Women Now's work continues to grow. As part of its 2024-2028 strategic plan, Women Now has identified three strategic organisational objectives. These objectives are rooted in the need to recognise, respond, and emerge to the reality of a shifting context: Formalize Women Now for Development as a network of Syrian feminist organisations - Women Now is changing from a single entity to an umbrella collective composed of four discrete organizations with a shared strategic vision. By shifting into four distinct organizations in Turkey, Syria, and EU, Women Now seeks to strengthen its sustainability and strategic positioning to better support the ongoing realities of operating in contexts of complex crisis and protracted conflict.



Resourcing & Supporting Syrian women-led initiatives - Women Now - as a collective of organizations - is well positioned to resource the Syrian women's movement. Using a feminist definition of resources, Women Now member organisations have the networks, access, relationships, and infrastructure to provide funds, capacity tools (leadership programs, PSS services), virtual and physical safe spaces for women and human rights defenders, and run coordinated advocacy campaigns. A key learning from the earthquake response was the demand for these resources from women-led initiatives.



Enact peace/justice and accountability in Syria through feminist lens, specifically:

- Support women participative in justice and accountability
- Support women leaderships
- Support survivor centered approaches and women/feminist perspective on justice and accountability including 'mainstreaming gender through providing tools, trainings
- Produce knowledge/narratives tools around gender impact of crimes, feminist perspective on justice and accountabilities
- Challenging the militarization of the region though building transnational solidarity networks, community mobilizing and knowledge production