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At What Cost?

Women-Led Organizations, Funding Cuts,
and the Price of Survival

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A Rohingya woman and child walk through Balukhali camp in Cox's Bazar. Photo: UN Women/ Allison Joyce

Executive Summary

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

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

were conducted in May 2026 and analyzed using a participatory, inductive approach to identify common themes across contexts.

At a time when humanitarian needs are reaching record levels, the global humanitarian system is confronting a profound funding crisis.

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

gender equality and women's rights; loss of technical expertise and institutional memory; and weakening of community-based protection systems.

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

Recommendations

Humanitarian actors, donors, and UN agencies must:

Increase the percentage of direct and dedicated funding to WLOs and gender-responsive humanitarian priorities.

Donors and pooled funds should establish measurable targets for the percentage of humanitarian funding reaching WLOs, and dedicated funding envelopes for priorities such as gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and response, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and women's leadership. The Somalia Humanitarian Fund provides a useful model, having created a dedicated envelope for GBV and child protection activities. Donors, including country-based pool funds (CBPFs), should publicly report annually on funding allocated to WLOs and gender-related priorities to strengthen accountability and track progress.

Prioritize flexible, multi-year funding and funding for institutional capacity-strengthening for WLOs.

Out of available funding, donors should increase flexible, multi-year grants that support programming, organizational health, and overhead expenses. This allows WLOs to rapidly adapt to changing needs and priorities, implement programs with sustained impact, build and maintain institutional capacity, and maintain long-term relationships with communities.

Simplify requirements for WLOs to access funding.

Streamline eligibility criteria and simplify grant application, management, monitoring, and reporting processes for local WLOs—providing technical and financial support for these processes where necessary. Due diligence requirements should, where appropriate, be adapted to the size and type of organization—including community-based organizations (CBOs) and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—and due diligence passporting should be scaled up.¹ The Ukraine Humanitarian Fund (UHF) has successfully introduced a contextualized capacity assessment process for local organizations and created direct funding pathways for national NGOs, helping increase the share of funding allocated to WLOs from 19 percent in 2023 to 31 percent in 2024.²

Support and increase safe and meaningful WLO participation and leadership across all levels of humanitarian coordination and decision-making spaces,

including Humanitarian Country Teams, CBPFs, cluster and sector coordination systems (beyond GBV and SRHR) and Humanitarian Needs Overview and Humanitarian Response Plans. Lessons can be learned and applied across systems from the GBV Area of Responsibility's experience of supporting WLOs' meaningful participation and leadership in GBV coordination.³ Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Groups remain critical platforms for WLO coordination and for advancing gender priorities within multiple humanitarian contexts, but require sustained investment.⁴

Invest in funds and platforms that support the autonomy of WLOs to determine priorities and exercise decision-making authority over resources.

The Feminist Humanitarian Network Uganda National Platform offers an example of new models of humanitarian funding and management that enable WLO leadership, collective governance, risk-sharing, and long-term community wellbeing⁵; while the First Response Fund offers an example of a global, feminist pooled fund, governed by a collective of WLOs and feminist funds.⁶

Conduct regular mapping of WLOs and engage in proactive outreach to WLOs.

Donors, including CBPFs, should engage in proactive outreach to WLOs, providing clear information on eligibility and due diligence requirements to access funding. The Syria Humanitarian Fund has demonstrated how targeted mapping of local actors, focused outreach to WLOs, and information sessions on eligibility and due diligence requirements can help expand access to humanitarian financing for organizations that might otherwise be excluded.

Invest in complementarity, not competition.

For the humanitarian system to remain effective and impactful for local communities, funding opportunities intended for local or national entities must limit competition from international NGOs. The new IASC Framework on Humanitarian Complementarity offers a model in which humanitarian actors can take on complementary roles to support common objectives—for example, technical expertise, logistics and coordination, or advocacy and information sharing.⁷

Introduction

The global humanitarian system has entered the most severe period of contraction in its history. Beginning in late 2024 and accelerating sharply throughout 2025, major donor governments reduced humanitarian funding at a time of growing humanitarian need.⁸ The United States (US), historically the humanitarian system's single largest donor, drastically cut foreign aid and dissolved the US Agency for International Development (USAID). Several European donors also reduced support.⁹ The UN's Emergency Relief Coordinator described this moment as a "humanitarian reset," arguing that the scale of funding reductions required a fundamental rethinking of how humanitarian assistance is prioritized and delivered, with a sharper focus on the most urgent life-saving needs. This new reality was quickly reflected by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' (OCHA's) operating guidelines, which narrowed humanitarian ambitions from addressing the full scope of identified needs to prioritizing only the most urgent, lifesaving assistance for those deemed to be at greatest risk.¹⁰

Funding cuts have hit WLOs and women's rights organizations especially hard.

These drastic changes have had immediate effects throughout the humanitarian sector, including sudden project closures, staffing cuts, reduced sub-granting, and widespread downsizing among UN agencies, international NGOs (INGOs), and local organizations. In some cases, this has meant reduced support for sectors of work frequently treated as secondary or "non-essential."¹¹ This includes, but is not limited to, GBV prevention and

response, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), SRHR, legal aid, education, livelihoods, and community-based protection. Although donors often claimed that lifesaving services would be protected from funding cuts, many of the programs they categorized as non-essential served critical functions for women and girls. The resulting impact on women and girls in humanitarian contexts has been particularly devastating. The reduction of these services has been associated with increased rates of maternal mortality and morbidity, child marriage, intimate partner violence, trafficking, and the exploitation of women and girls.¹²

Funding cuts have hit WLOs and women's rights organizations (WROs) especially hard. Long before the current funding crisis, WLOs were already operating within an unequal and flawed humanitarian financing system. Furthermore, WLOs face gender-specific barriers, risks, and exclusions that intensify the consequences of funding cuts. Many WLOs have been excluded from humanitarian coordination and decision-making spaces where information about funding opportunities, priorities, and partnerships is shared.¹³ And although the percentage of funding to local and national actors—including WLOs—has increased over the last several years and representation in humanitarian coordination has improved, WLOs still face challenges accessing funds and decision-making opportunities.

Although the systems to get financial support to local and national organizations have improved, the recent funding cuts have created a crisis for

most WLOs working in humanitarian settings. In April 2025, among 411 WLOs in humanitarian settings, nearly half reported that they risked closure within six months, and only 18 percent reported that they anticipated they would stay operational for more than a year.¹⁴ Today, WLOs that have survived up to this point are finding themselves forced to lay off staff, close offices, reduce geographic coverage, and/or suspend longer-term work such as prevention and advocacy to focus on more immediate emergency needs of people in their communities.

Despite growing documentation highlighting the swift impacts of funding shortfalls, there remains limited knowledge about how WLOs are coping with these rapid changes.¹⁵ What research does exist has focused on the services these organizations are unable to provide, the programs that have closed, and both the real and projected harms to women and girls. Much less is known about how these trade-offs affect day-to-day decisions, strategies, and the long-term implications for WLOs in humanitarian settings.

This research seeks to address this gap in the evidence by assessing how WLOs are experiencing and responding to funding cuts, with particular attention to challenges, strategies, and consequences of adaptation. Understanding how these dynamics play out within WLOs working in humanitarian settings is critical, not only to understand how they are surviving, but also to have a better idea of what lies ahead for localization, community-led humanitarian responses, and gender-responsive humanitarian programming. If WLOs in humanitarian settings have no choice but to close, it will not just be seen in programs shutting down and people not getting the help they need. The loss will be seen in weakened protection systems, increased violence and exploitation, setbacks to progress on gender equality and women's rights, and the disappearance of some of the few trusted structures women and girls can still turn to when formal systems fail.

A woman looks out the window of a shelter for survivors of GBV run by Ukrainian WLO NGO Zaporuka. Photo: NGO Zaporuka/ Danylo Sekunda.



Table 1: Humanitarian Funding Cuts Across Six Contexts (2025)

Sources: OCHA, UN, Joint Response Plan (JRP), Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) reports.
 Funding amounts are in USD.

	Afghanistan	Bangladesh (Cox's Bazar)	Honduras
CRISIS CONTEXT	- Taliban controlled - Restrictions on women's rights - Rising food insecurity - Lack of health services	- Rohingya refugee crisis 1 million+ refugees - Recurring floods & fires	- Climate shocks - Food insecurity - Violence and displacement
PEOPLE IN NEED vs. PEOPLE TARGETED*	22.9 million people in need 16.8 million people targeted	1.48 million people in need 1.48 million people targeted	1.6 million people in need 800,000 people targeted
FUNDING REQUESTED vs. FUNDING RECEIVED*	\$2.42 billion requested \$1.01 billion received	\$934.5 million requested \$434.5 million received	\$138.5 million requested \$14.7 million received
CUTS from 2024 to 2025	~\$570 million 36% decrease	~\$202 million 36% decrease	~\$50.7 million 78% decrease
KEY FINDINGS	- The health sector has been affected most significantly by funding cuts, in addition to education and protection. - WLOs are relying on personal sacrifice and not paying staff. - Historically, Afghan women have had minimal power and direct funding within the international aid system; cuts have virtually eliminated their opportunities.	- Rohingya women and girls are without health, GBV, education, and psychosocial services, and child marriage, trafficking, and protection risks are increasing. - Many WLOs have closed entirely and the ones that remain are relying on volunteerism. - Most WLOs cannot legally register so it has always been difficult to get direct international funding; now it is even more difficult.	- Women and girls are losing access to critical protection and support services despite high demand and many referrals. - Some WLOs are engaging in income-generating activities outside of their expertise, but it is not sustainable. - Cuts are eroding decades of investment in women's organizing, leadership, and rights.

*All data on the people in need, people targeted, funding requested and funding received reflect 2025 estimates and funding levels.

Table 1: Humanitarian Funding Cuts Across Six Contexts (2025) Continued

	Lebanon	Sudan	Ukraine
CRISIS CONTEXT	• Large Syrian and Palestinian refugee communities • Economic crisis • Active conflict with Israel	• Sudan Armed Forces—Rapid Support Forces (SAF-RSF) war • Largest global displacement crisis • Famine and hunger • Health sector collapse • Widespread GBV	• Russia’s full-scale invasion • Mass displacement, including refugees and IDPs • Attacks on infrastructure
PEOPLE IN NEED vs. PEOPLE TARGETED*	4.1 million people in need 3.6 million people targeted	30.4 million people in need 20.9 million people targeted	12.7 million people in need 4.8 million people targeted
FUNDING REQUESTED vs. FUNDING RECEIVED*	\$710.1 million requested \$573.6 million received	\$4.16 billion requested \$1.66 billion received	\$2.63 billion requested \$1.72 billion received
CUTS from 2024 to 2025	 ~\$630 million 47% decrease	 ~\$880 million 46% decrease	 ~\$630 million 28% decrease
KEY FINDINGS	• Feminist and social change work is being crowded out by emergency survival work. • WLOs are absorbing the effects of the cuts through burnout, sacrifice, and constant fundraising. • Localization is expanding in rhetoric, but not in power or resources.	• Emergency response is being prioritized over women’s empowerment, peacebuilding, and long-term recovery. • Funding shocks that INGOs have absorbed are pushing many Sudanese WLOs toward collapse. • Local WLOs remain on the frontlines of Sudan’s response despite personal sacrifice and risk.	• Women and girls are losing access to critical protection and support services despite high demand and many referrals. • Some WLOs are engaging in income-generating activities outside of their expertise, but it is not sustainable. • Cuts are eroding decades of investment in women’s organizing, leadership, and rights.

*All data on the people in need, people targeted, funding requested and funding received reflect 2025 estimates and funding levels.

Methodology

This report draws on a literature review and qualitative interviews with representatives of WLOs working across six settings: Afghanistan, Bangladesh (Cox's Bazar), Honduras, Lebanon, Sudan, and Ukraine. Countries were purposively selected to ensure geographical diversity and representation across a range of humanitarian contexts, displacement dynamics, and funding modalities. Key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted in May 2026 with representatives of

Key informant interviews were conducted with WLOs operating in Afghanistan, Bangladesh (Cox's Bazar), Honduras, Lebanon, Sudan, and Ukraine.

28 WLOs. KII participants were identified through purposive sampling based on their organizations' engagement in humanitarian response and support to women and girls. Interviews were conducted virtually in the participant's preferred language. Verbal informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Interviews were audio-recorded when consent was provided and subsequently transcribed and translated into English for analysis. The research team conducted participatory co-analysis using an inductive approach to identify major themes, patterns, and emerging findings across participants and contexts.

Limitations

This research has several limitations. Interviews were conducted only with WLOs that remained operational at the time of data collection, meaning the experiences of WLOs forced to shut down entirely are not captured. In addition, while this study covers a range of humanitarian contexts, it should not be seen as representative of all WLOs' experiences. The findings are intended to illustrate broader trends, not to provide statistically generalizable conclusions across every context. Participants were identified primarily through existing networks and professional contacts, which may have excluded WLOs operating further outside formal humanitarian coordination systems. In addition, data collection was conducted virtually, which may have limited participation among smaller or more resource-constrained WLOs with less reliable access to technology or internet connectivity. Furthermore, some interviews were conducted in English with participants who were not native English speakers, which may have affected the depth or precision of certain responses.



AFGHANISTAN:

The Cost of Defunding Women's Health Services

*Name has been changed to protect participant's privacy.

Sedigh is an executive director of one of Afghanistan's largest midwives associations. "As midwives and healthcare workers, we are one of the very few professional groups of women in Afghanistan who are still permitted to work, but the US funding cut took away that opportunity from many of us as well", she says. Her organization works across 34 provinces in Afghanistan and has more than 4,000 midwife members and 300+ women on the payroll. "It is purely led and run by women," she adds.

The funding cuts meant immediately eliminating more than 100 of the organization's critical staff members and shutting down one of Kabul's busiest maternal and neonatal care centers, which supported a government hospital. "We had 52 midwives, who provided services for the mothers at this center. These midwives delivered 700 to 800 babies a month. Around 2,000 mothers received the services in the center, like antenatal, postnatal, and family planning." Sedigh says that shutting down lifesaving facilities like this resulted in fatalities that could have easily been avoided. She refers to a recent incident where a pregnant woman visited the hospital with postpartum hemorrhaging; due to the shortage of staff, no one could assist her and she ultimately died. Sedigh says this is just one of the many such cases reported.

Sedigh, who herself is advancing her expertise and knowledge in midwifery through an international

remote master's program, says that the US funding was a significant source of support for midwives and women across the country. It supported the capacity building and training of midwives in the most remote provinces of Afghanistan where, otherwise, mothers have no access to maternal healthcare support. She adds that this funding cut has meant that around 152 remote health facilities have closed down, drastically impacting the quality of healthcare, if available at all, to women and mothers in the remotest districts and villages.

"As midwives and healthcare workers, we are one of the very few professional groups of women in Afghanistan who are still permitted to work, but the US funding cut took away that opportunity from many of us as well." –SEDIGEH*

Despite the high mortality of pregnant women and new mothers reported, Sedigh says that no consequential alternative funding has come in. In many locations in Afghanistan, healthcare facilities have had to completely shut down their services and in others significantly reduce their support to the community. As an Afghan who is a mother, a midwife, and a woman leader, Sedigh says she feels helpless and hopeless.

Findings

Three overarching themes emerged across the findings.

WLOs consistently viewed the current funding crisis as exposing longstanding weaknesses in the humanitarian system.

WLOs described being forced to adopt increasingly unsustainable survival strategies that enable short-term continuity but undermine organizational capacity, staff well-being, and long-term impact.

WLOs emphasized that these adaptations come at a significant cost, reducing support for women and girls and eroding hard-won gains in gender equality and women's rights.

Afghan women and children at Torkham crossing point on the Afghanistan/Pakistan border. Photo: UN Women/Sayed Habib Bidell.



Longstanding weaknesses in the humanitarian system

Across all six settings, WLOs consistently reported significant impacts of the funding cuts. Yet participants were also clear that changes in funding since early 2025 were not an entirely new challenge; rather, they commonly felt that the last year has merely exposed structural weaknesses in the humanitarian system and exacerbated longstanding challenges faced by WLOs. For many participants, the issue went beyond access to funding alone. The absence of direct funding was often viewed as a symptom of a broader imbalance in power and influence within the humanitarian system.

Lagging commitments to localization and women's leadership

Nearly all participants explained that they were accustomed to funding shortages, challenging donor dynamics, and the need to rapidly adapt operations. A Sudanese leader who has been working at a WLO for the last 10 years said:

Before 2025, as Sudanese women-led organizations, we were funded mainly through restricted, short-term subgrants from international donors and UN agencies, with very limited direct or flexible support. This left us financially fragile, heavily dependent on intermediaries, and unable to sustain long-term programming.

In fact, some WLOs felt that the international community's focus on US funding cuts has obscured the need to address the deeper issue of a humanitarian system driven by Global North donors that often does not do enough to prioritize gender equality, invest in local actors, or strengthen government capacity to deliver programs and services for women and girls. Most participants also expressed frustration that years of commitments to "women's leadership" had not translated into meaningful structural change. Despite repeated rhetoric around shifting power to local women leaders, many WLOs said they remained isolated from major funding mechanisms and were expected to continue operating under increasingly challenging circumstances.

As a leader of a WLO in Afghanistan further explained, "For twenty years, everyone talked about supporting Afghan women, but very little funding actually reached Afghan women-led organizations directly." She went on to say:

The money coming in was spent predominantly by big American contractors; very little went to Afghan women or local organizations. They said it was there for Afghan women, but they didn't really let any Afghan women make decisions about how to spend it. There's a huge push around this narrative that local organizations are weak and internationals need to be there to build their capacity.

Participants expressed similar frustrations around prior commitments to localization. As one Rohingya woman leader observed, "Localization has become a kind of performance. The money is not really reaching local organizations directly," while an Afghan WLO said, "A lot of funding for local organizations is mistaken as funding for localization. So, in Afghanistan, we have so many initiatives where international organizations are giving very small grants to very capable organizations, and they're calling it localization initiatives."

WLOs in Lebanon reiterated that localization commitments are not being upheld, as one representative stated, “For years we have been talking about localization, but when the crisis comes, funding still goes to the same international actors.” A leader from another Lebanese WLO stated, “When we talk about localization, it does not mean cheaper....Localization is about shifting power to local organizations.”

The current moment of humanitarian system reform offers an opportunity for more meaningful shifts in power and resources toward local actors, but many participants felt that this transformation is still not taking place. In fact, some felt that WLOs are being pushed further out of an already restricted funding ecosystem. The executive director of a Lebanese WLO shared:

We talk about UN80 and about a humanitarian reset because of all these funding cuts. But honestly, we are still going back to the same structure; just changing the names....In the Grand Bargain, for ten years now, we have been saying that 26 percent of funding should go directly to local actors. But how much is actually going? Until now, less than 6 percent of total humanitarian funding goes directly to local organizations.

Unfilled funding gaps

WLO participants emphasized that the vacuum left by US funding cuts has not been filled by alternative funding sources. Humanitarian assistance, as part of Official Development Assistance (ODA), fell by more than 35 percent in 2025.²¹ While many WLO participants had initially hoped that other donors, whether governments, multilateral actors, private philanthropy, or regional funders, would step in to offset the loss of support, none of the participants reported that this had materialized. Instead, 26 of 34 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) members reduced their humanitarian assistance budgets, many of them drastically.²² This reduction was particularly

Women-Led Organizations and Country-Based Pooled Funds

Data from CBPFs—designed, in part, to provide predictable, flexible funding and expand access for local and national actors—do demonstrate some progress in expanding the share of funding going to local groups, including to WLOs. For example, in 2021, local and national organizations received 26 percent of CBPF funding, although WLOs received just 3.5 percent.¹⁶ In contrast, in 2025, 55 percent (when including subgrants, 46 percent was direct funding) of funding from global CBPFs went to local and national organizations, and 17 percent went to WLOs.¹⁷

The most notable improvement over the last several years in the portion of financial support getting to WLOs is in Afghanistan and Ukraine.

In 2023 in Afghanistan, only one WLO received \$260,000; in 2024, the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund provided \$2.5 million to three WLOs.¹⁸ In Ukraine, 31 percent of total humanitarian funding (\$50.4 million) went to WLOs in 2024, compared to just 19 percent in 2023.

While these are significant and encouraging increases, none of the WLO participants mentioned CBPFs as a source of support for their organizations. CBPFs also remain a small fraction of the humanitarian landscape. In 2024, out of \$41 billion¹⁹ in total humanitarian aid, \$930 million²⁰ was allocated through CBPFs, representing just over two percent of total humanitarian assistance.

acute in contexts such as Afghanistan and Honduras, where the humanitarian response had become heavily dependent on US assistance over many years. WLO participants in these countries viewed this as evidence of a deeper structural imbalance within the humanitarian system, in which essential services

for women and girls remain highly dependent on a narrow group of donors rather than sustained, diversified, and locally rooted sources of support.

In Honduras, for example, when asked if her organization had identified any new donors, the head of a WLO replied, "Honestly, right now we would be lying if we said yes, because at the moment we are surviving with our bare hands. Right now, we have neither new nor old donors. Right now, we are surviving purely through struggle." In Afghanistan, the director of a WLO explained, "After the cut of USAID, Afghanistan, and also our organization tried the best to find another solution for this, but unfortunately, we didn't find a solution....There is no alternative option to solve this gap. Currently in Afghanistan, there is not any replacement fund for these kinds of problems."

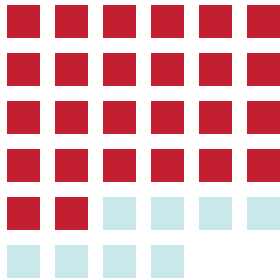
Similarly, participants reflected on the fragility of a humanitarian system that had become heavily dependent on external donor financing without corresponding long-term investments in public systems capable of sustaining services for women and girls. Research on GBV funding in humanitarian settings has found that most grants are project-based and do not adequately invest in longer-term systems or institutions.²³ The World Bank has even highlighted the harms women and girls face in areas that are conflict-affected and where public institutions are unable to provide services.²⁴ In several contexts, WLOs viewed expectations that their own governments could take on these responsibilities as unrealistic, given ongoing conflict, political instability, economic crisis, or government opposition to women's rights and gender equality initiatives. A Honduran WLO described the challenge of relying on the State for support:

We know the State will not respond adequately. Look, [even before] we had a supposedly left-wing government that could not even get the president to publish a tweet about femicides, right? Now [the new conservative government] even wants to reduce the budgets for the Ministry of Women and the shelters.

Competing for shrinking pools of funding

The impact of funding cuts on WLOs has been disproportionate in part because of how the cuts restructured competition. While all WLO participants were impacted by US funding cuts, most noted that they were never direct recipients of US government funding. Historically, they accessed resources as subrecipients through UN agencies or INGOs, competing primarily against other small, local organizations for dedicated funding pools. This structure, while limiting, provided a degree of separation from larger actors.

That separation has largely collapsed. As INGOs absorbed significant funding losses, they moved downstream into the same competitive spaces WLOs have long occupied. These INGOs often bring with them substantially greater staff resources and grant-writing expertise. WLOs are now competing against larger organizations for a shrinking pool of funding, fundamentally



26 of 34
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Women attend economic and political empowerment programming with Amel Foundation, a Lebanese WLO. Photo: UN Women/ Gonzalo Bell.



shifting the competitive landscape to their disadvantage. An organization in Lebanon described this process: “The biggest challenge is that INGOs are now competing with local organizations, and they are competing with WLOs. Sometimes we even see INGOs registering in the country to appear as local. So, this is another major challenge, not only the funding cuts.” A WLO leader from Cox’s Bazar explained:

Before, smaller grants were mostly available to local organizations and women-led groups. Big INGOs would not apply for those grants because they only focused on million-dollar programs. Now, INGOs are applying for everything because they also lost US funding... Now the competition is too difficult, and many small organizations will disappear.

Furthermore, national NGOs that used to fund WLOs and other grassroots organizations have also stopped funding WLOs due to their own funding being eliminated. A leader of a WLO in Cox’s Bazar explained, “They [national NGOs] are now doing the work themselves and they are not funding the local NGOs anymore. So, grassroots funding of local organizations has almost stopped completely.”

This increased competition not only places WLOs at a disadvantage in securing scarce funding, but also further marginalizes them within an already fragmented ecosystem in which funding is difficult to access. Few WLO participants were aware of alternative funding mechanisms such as CBPFs. Even those who were aware viewed access as too challenging. Meeting eligibility, compliance, reporting, and due diligence requirements often demands administrative capacity and resources that are more readily available to larger national and international NGOs. This creates additional barriers for smaller WLOs. A WLO representative in Lebanon explained:

WLOs are now competing against larger organizations for a shrinking pool of funding, fundamentally shifting the competitive landscape to their disadvantage.

We were proactive once we saw that all the funds would be channeled through country-based pooled funds. As you know the due diligence required to access pooled funding is very difficult. [It] is very challenging for local organizations, and especially for women-led organizations, because the due diligence requirements are very high and we cannot always meet them.

Loss of trust in the system and in donors

In addition to losing funding, some WLOs described a consequence of the aid cuts that is less tangible, but no less harmful: the erosion of their trust in donors who have spent years, and in some cases decades, supporting WLOs. Successful humanitarian partnerships are built on predictability, mutual accountability, and trust that the commitments made today will be upheld tomorrow. Through longstanding global agreements like the Grand Bargain, donors have repeatedly committed to providing more predictable, flexible, and multi-year funding to local actors. They recognize that uncertain financing undermines both organizational sustainability and localization efforts.²⁵ Yet for many WLOs, confidence in donor commitments has been shaken. In many cases, funding was suspended or terminated with little warning, projects were canceled in the middle of implementation, and promised future phases of programming disappeared almost overnight.

The leader of an organization in Ukraine explained, "Before, there was an understanding that we could rely on donors. Now, when we apply for projects, we must include the risk that a donor may leave in the middle." WLOs that hired staff and made commitments to their community based on prior assurances from donors suddenly found themselves unable to honor obligations to employees and beneficiaries through no fault of their own. Another leader from Ukraine said, "The funding crisis was not simply a financial shock; it was a breach of trust and confidence in the system."

For WLOs working on issues such as gender equality, SRHR, and GBV, trust with communities is essential and often takes years to build. Because this work can also expose women leaders to gender-specific and political risks, the loss of trust in donors is particularly harmful, with consequences that can extend beyond organizational operations to the safety and well-being of staff and beneficiaries alike.

In addition to the operational and security ramifications, inconsistent funding also erodes trust in the WLOs themselves. Research has consistently shown that WLOs often possess unique community relationships, legitimacy, and access to marginalized women and girls that cannot be easily replicated by external actors.²⁶ If affected populations perceive WLOs to be unreliable, people may become less willing to seek services, undermining the effectiveness of these programs even if funding is restored. A Lebanese WLO described this challenge:

All activities were brought to a halt immediately, [so] there were many question marks. What do we do with beneficiaries? Because when you are talking about services related to safety and security especially regarding SGBV, what do you tell the beneficiary? What do you tell the survivor? 'Sorry, I have to stop your case management because there is no more funding?'

The repercussions from this loss of trust will likely extend far beyond the current funding crisis. WLOs working in fragile environments that are already forced to plan for uncertainty face extra unpredictability. Their planning requires confidence that investments in staff, infrastructure, and community relationships will not be undermined by abrupt political decisions made thousands of miles away in Washington, DC, Geneva, or Brussels.

Short-term survival strategies

Across all contexts examined in this research, WLOs demonstrated remarkable creativity, flexibility, and determination when adapting to such drastic aid cuts. Organizations have diversified their donor outreach, reduced overhead, relied on volunteers, partnered with other organizations, explored social enterprise models, appealed to diaspora communities, and limited their programming to emergency response only. However, across all interviews, WLOs framed staff reductions, unpaid labor, and the collapse of institutional capacity as signs that the effects of these funding cuts are pushing these organizations beyond their limits. WLO leaders consistently highlighted that these strategies are temporary survival mechanisms, not sustainable solutions that can address the power imbalances of the humanitarian system. As one Afghan leader observed, "Everybody's concerned about funding their work. They're not concerned about building a new system."

Social entrepreneurship and alternative fundraising

Another common theme across contexts was that WLOs described their efforts to create their own income-generating activities in an effort to reduce dependence on outside donors. In Honduras, organizations discussed selling baked goods, organizing garage sales, and exploring service-based social enterprise models such as childcare and language classes. One participant noted, however, that these efforts bring in only around \$700 per month, far below what is needed to sustain programs and services. In Lebanon, several organizations mentioned forming sister associations abroad to tap into other networks, establish cooperatives, create small production spaces, and undertake other small-scale fundraising activities.

With difficulty accessing traditional donor funds, WLOs in Sudan and Lebanon have also turned to diaspora communities for financial assistance. Several organizations mentioned reaching out to connections abroad and seeking contributions from individuals with personal, family, or community ties to the crises they are responding to. As explained by one Lebanese WLO, "For me personally, one of my strategies is to participate in any networking opportunity or international space where I can speak about our experience." For WLOs unable to access donor funds or connect with international NGOs, diaspora support can be one of the few sources of funding that can be mobilized quickly and used to cover critical staffing, operational, or program gaps.

Although these approaches reflect creativity, they cannot replace institutional humanitarian funding. Social enterprise models often generate only modest

Although social enterprise approaches reflect creativity, they cannot replace institutional humanitarian funding.

income and place additional burdens on already exhausted staff. Some organizations questioned if humanitarian and gender-focused organizations should be expected to essentially become micro-businesses to survive donor and state abandonment. WLO leaders also agreed that diaspora donations cannot substitute for the scale or predictability of institutional humanitarian funding. While WLOs may choose to explore these initiatives as supplemental funding sources, these approaches are not a substitute for long-term public and institutional investment in the rights, protection, and well-being of women and girls.

Cutting staff and the “deprofessionalization” of services

Staff cuts emerged as one of the most widespread consequences of the funding crisis. WLOs across Sudan, Lebanon, Cox’s Bazar, Afghanistan, and Honduras all described having to lay off employees, cut salaries, reduce staff hours, and rely more heavily on unpaid staff and volunteers. Participants also emphasized that the loss of staff extends beyond individual positions. In many cases, funding cuts are eroding years or even decades of investment in women’s leadership, specialized skills, institutional memory, and community-based protection systems.

Many participants explained that cuts disproportionately affected senior and technical staff. In Cox’s Bazar, one participant described how funding reductions effectively removed “the upper-level brain of the organization.” A Sudanese WLO participant said, “Technical specialists, for example, GBV case managers and legal advisors, are often the first to go when funding dries up.” As more senior staff are let go or leave, organizations lose years of institutional knowledge and the capacity to mentor more junior colleagues. They also lose technical expertise on protection, GBV response, psychosocial support, and coordination. Recent research by UN Women also documented that funding cuts resulted in the loss of experienced staff, raising concerns about the loss of institutional knowledge and technical capacity that can take years to develop and is difficult to replace.²⁷ A Lebanese WLO participant explained:

Most of the organizations, especially women-led ones, that I work with faced problems. They reduced salaries, let go of many employees, and were no longer able to provide quality services. Because when you provide case management, it cannot be done by just any social worker or volunteer; it requires expertise, and you have to pay for that expertise.

The depletion of technical expertise also risks fueling what several participants described as the “deprofessionalization” of humanitarian and protection services. Once experienced staff leave, these capacities and relationships cannot easily be rebuilt, even if funding is restored in the future. Remaining staff at WLOs are forced to take on multiple roles often without adequate training, support, or compensation. In Afghanistan, the leader of a WLO explained, “Now staff are doing multiple roles. For example, one education specialist is doing reporting, communication with donors, communication with field offices, and monitoring. It is not possible for one person to be expert in all areas, but they have to manage everything.”

Research on humanitarian staff well-being has found that this overload of work and lack of support unsurprisingly leads to excessive staff turnover and/or less effective programs.²⁸ Program quality suffers when organizations lack sufficient technical expertise. Participants explained that while staff may remain deeply committed to supporting their communities, they can only handle

increased workloads for so long. They stressed that current funding levels were unsustainable and would, if they have not already, eventually negatively impact program quality. A WLO in Ukraine that focuses on protection and assistance for IDPs explained, “When projects stop, people lose motivation and resources. When funding comes back, you cannot continue from where you stopped. You must start again—find people again, motivate them again.”

Reliance on volunteers and unpaid labor

Volunteerism was described as one of the most common adaptation strategies implemented by WLOs across all contexts. WLOs explained that organizations are scrambling to fill gaps in personnel with unpaid or underpaid staff, community volunteers, feminist networks, and informal support systems to maintain programming. A WLO leader in Afghanistan, describing how unsustainable their current situation is, said, “We owe salaries to staff, but we do not receive funding. Staff worked for three or six months, but we cannot pay all salaries. It is very difficult to explain this to staff, because they work to support their families.”

Relying on volunteers highlights the degree to which humanitarian systems depend on women’s personal sacrifices and unpaid labor to compensate for the lack of institutional funding and support.

In Cox’s Bazar, many women leaders and volunteers continued working for months or even years without salaries because they felt morally responsible toward their communities. One executive director explained that she had moved into her office after losing the ability to afford rent for her home following funding cuts. She said, “In that difficult time to survive, we had to cut our staff...and we brought in more localized and voluntary staff. I stopped renting my house and moved into a room in the office...We are all struggling.”

The decision to work without pay or with drastically reduced salaries is one that many WLOs are making out of a deep commitment to their communities. However, relying on volunteers highlights the degree to which humanitarian systems depend on women’s

personal sacrifices and unpaid labor to compensate for the lack of institutional funding and support, an issue that has long plagued humanitarian responses.²⁹ At the same time that humanitarian funding cuts are reducing services and support for women and girls, many women working within WLOs are also losing their own livelihoods, making them both responders to the crisis and among those most directly harmed by it. WLOs continue to function not because humanitarian financing systems are working effectively, but because women leaders and staff absorb the consequences—personally, emotionally, and financially.

Some participants also noted that increasing reliance on unpaid volunteer labor, as well as pressure to accept funding from donors that want WLOs to change their practices, can also lead organizations to contradict their core values, feminist principles, and even national labor laws. A Ukrainian WLO participant explained:

Some donors returned and told us not to use gender terminology or mention diversity or inclusion. I told them I would not do that. I told them directly that if funding comes with these conditions, I can live without that money. But also, paying people their salaries and upholding our end of the contract is part of Ukrainian legislation. We are trying to follow the law. So it is tough.



BANGLADESH:

The Cost of Losing Community-Led Protection in Cox's Bazar

*Name has been changed to protect participant's privacy.

"I am a Rohingya refugee woman who co-founded an organization in 2017—the very year I fled Myanmar and came to Bangladesh seeking safety; and today we are on the brink of closing down.... It is difficult to survive with no money," Noor, a 22-year-old Rohingya woman, realized that the main problem she and other women in her community needed to stop was the vicious cycle of child marriage and gender-based violence. So she, along with other Rohingya youth—supported by funding from organizations like UN Women and IOM—went from camp to camp, mobilizing youth volunteers and building awareness about the importance of educating girls, stopping child marriages, and standing up against domestic and gender-based violence. This work was lifesaving, as the camps in Cox's Bazar are plagued by the trafficking of girls, child marriages, and violence against women.

However, a year and a half ago, their work came to a grinding halt when their funding stopped, with drastic consequences. "Trafficking of girls and

"This is our community, and so we have to work for them paid or unpaid. People are suffering... women and girls suffering. And if we don't help them, who will?" –NOOR*

youth increased. Lured by dalals (smugglers) many more women, girls, and youth started taking risky boat journeys to Malaysia in search of jobs.... Many drowned and died."

Despite being a student herself and a provider for her family, Noor decided she had to continue her organizational work, even without any money, for the benefit of her community. So she and another 20 youth cut their workdays from five to two per week and resumed their work, unpaid. "This is our community, and so we have to work for them paid or unpaid. People are suffering... women and girls suffering. And if we don't help them, who will?"

WLOs that have been committed to principles of dignity, decent work, and women's economic empowerment are being forced into operational models that rely on unpaid labor and compromising their personal well-being to continue their work. The leader of another Ukrainian organization stated, "Many organizations are surviving because people feel personally committed to the mission, not because there is funding to support the work."

The costs of "efficiency"

Donors and humanitarian actors increasingly speak of efficiency³⁰ and prioritization³¹ as necessary responses to shrinking aid budgets. Although both are worthwhile objectives, there is a risk that these efforts can overlook the significant sacrifices and difficult choices organizations are forced to make in order to adapt. WLO leaders across all six countries described adaptation as a process of figuring out how best to serve the growing needs of their communities while being less resourced to do so, ultimately reducing their ability to adequately address the needs and rights of women and girls.

Reducing reach and increasing harms for women and girls

In addition to the short-term survival strategies described above, many WLOs have adapted to funding cuts by reducing the scope of their programming. Across Sudan, Lebanon, and Cox's Bazar, WLOs described difficult decisions to suspend activities in remote areas, rural communities, or conflict-affected areas in order to preserve minimal services elsewhere. In practice this has often meant concentrating limited resources in locations that are easier to access, while reducing support for populations whose needs are more complex and resource-intensive to address.

Dignity kits are distributed to women and girls in Sumy, Ukraine, in partnership with NGO Girls, a Ukrainian WLO. Photo: UN Women Ukraine/ Denys Kryvopysyn.



Several participants expressed concern that these decisions have particularly severe implications for populations that are already facing heightened exclusion or vulnerability, including women and girls on the frontlines of conflict, displaced populations, LGBTQI+ individuals, adolescent girls, survivors of violence, and women in remote areas. A 2025 report from UN Women found that, following aid cuts, 62 percent of WLOs surveyed had already reduced services for women and girls and 51 percent had completely suspended programs.³² As the executive director of a Sudanese WLO explained, funding constraints have required organizations to scale back outreach to some of the communities with the greatest needs:

In some cases, outreach to remote or high-need communities was reduced, and certain vulnerable groups received less support than originally planned. These difficult [financial] adjustments have negatively affected project outcomes, slowed progress toward community-level change, and reduced the overall impact of programs designed to support women, vulnerable groups, and local resilience in Sudan's already fragile humanitarian context.

Participants also described how reductions in funding have directly limited access to critical health services. In Afghanistan, the closure of health facilities has reduced access to care for women and girls living in isolated communities. One Afghan WLO leader stated, "The worst effect [of the aid cuts] is related to access because this end of funding means that around 152 remote health facilities closed."

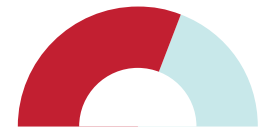
Similarly, a Lebanese WLO warned that cuts to primary healthcare services are leaving vulnerable women with few alternatives: "When [international organizations] stop funding [clinics and primary healthcare centers], beneficiaries who cannot go to the private sector are left without options. This could lead to increases in maternal mortality and diseases as well."

In Cox's Bazar, WLO leaders described how staff reductions and service closures have undermined trusted pathways through which Rohingya women previously accessed care and support. One leader explained:

Before, women came regularly to our centers because they trusted us. But once we lost the paramedics and staff, the flow stopped. Now, maybe one or two women seek services instead of ten. Pregnant women often cannot access hospitals, especially those in distant camps. Many are giving birth at home without supervision. There have been infant deaths and maternal deaths because women could not access blood transfusions or emergency care in time.

Some WLOs also reported that funding cuts are contributing to a rise in protection risks while simultaneously weakening the systems designed to respond to them. In Cox's Bazar, one WLO participant observed increases in domestic violence, child marriage, and trafficking as economic hardship deepens among refugee families: "After the funding cuts, most people became financially desperate. They do not have money to buy proper food for their families."

Of WLOs surveyed in a 2025 UN Women Report:



62%
had already reduced services for women and girls



51%
had completely suspended programs

Shifting mandates and scaling back language

Many organizations reported having to modify their language, mandates, and programming to secure funding in an increasingly restrictive humanitarian and political environment. While funding cuts have intensified these pressures, participants emphasized that they are also occurring within a broader backlash against gender equality, women's rights, and SRHR, particularly following changes in US government policy and donor priorities. For example, the January 2026 US policy memorandum, "Combating Gender Ideology in Foreign Assistance," directs foreign assistance programs to align with new restrictions on gender-related policies and terminology.³³ The implementation of this policy is reinforcing concerns among humanitarian actors that support for gender-focused programming is becoming increasingly politicized.

These shifts indeed go beyond questions of language or framing. Participants described increasing pressure to alter how they speak about women's rights and gender equality in order to remain eligible for funding, highlighting the narrowing of space for feminist advocacy and rights-based programming. A Lebanese WLO participant said, "Some [WLOs] shifted their direction. For example, if they were providing protection services, they shifted to working with municipalities on something else. They moved away from their original mandate, which is something they do not really prefer."

Several WLOs described avoiding explicit references to feminism, gender equality, SRHR, LGBTQI+ rights, or GBV in proposals and public-facing communications because they feared losing funding. For example, in Honduras, one WLO refused funding because the grant prohibited discussion of SRHR. The organization also withdrew from a consortium because, at the demand of donors, it was required to restrict language related to violence against women. In Lebanon, several WLOs described embedding gender work in other more "fundable" topics.

One Lebanese organization that focuses on gender equality explained, "We have had to find ways to address gender without explicitly framing it as

Members of the We Rise project pose for a photo. The project trains rural women in Sudan in agriculture, trade, and economic rights, bridging gender gaps and empowering communities. Photo: UN Photo/ Mona Elfateh, via UN Women



gender. For example, if we are talking about climate, gender is framed as an intersecting lens. If we are talking about health, we are not necessarily talking specifically about reproductive health, but about health more broadly, with reproductive health embedded within it.”

A Palestinian WLO working in Lebanon explained, “Because we are a feminist and secular organisation, we cannot resort to just any charity funding, because they would not accept us anyway. Of course, this affects us. Our ability to provide protection for children and women has been affected the most.” These shifts point to growing tensions between organizational survival and feminist principles.

For some WLOs, this means compromising and reframing. For others, it means turning away funding opportunities that conflict with their values. In interview after interview, leaders described the dilemma as a particularly painful aspect of the current humanitarian moment. Many WLOs felt that organizations devoted to advancing women’s rights are being pressured to dilute their missions simply to survive.

Burnout, trauma, and exhaustion

Beyond operational impacts, participants consistently described profound emotional and psychological consequences of the funding cuts. WLOs continue adapting because women and girls need support, perhaps now more than ever. But these adaptations are coming through sacrifice, volunteer labor, institutional erosion, and burnout rather than through effective localization or policy change. A WLO in Lebanon that focuses on GBV prevention and response explained:

We are working in a context of precarity, vulnerability, and marginalization. We are working where public institutions are fragile and where there are no strong social systems in place. We are operating under extremely difficult conditions, with limited resources, high demand, and immense needs. So burnout is natural.

Women leaders are shouldering more work and at the same time are often facing insecurity, political pressure, displacement, financial instability, and emotional trauma themselves.

WLOs’ experience reflects broader findings across the humanitarian sector which report that high levels of burnout and psychological challenges are linked to excessive workloads, lack of sufficient resources, and exposure to crisis environments.³⁴ The humanitarian system often celebrates local resilience, innovation, and flexibility. Yet across interviews, WLO leaders repeatedly emphasized that there is an enormous human cost to this assumption of local resilience. Women leaders are shouldering more work and at the same time are often facing insecurity, political pressure, displacement, financial instability, and emotional trauma themselves. Several participants also described a profound sense of frustration and moral distress. Many WLO leaders felt personally responsible for continuing to support women and girls despite having fewer and fewer

resources available to do so. In Honduras, for example, one shelter provider described the emotional toll of having to turn away women at risk because the organization no longer had the resources to accommodate them.

Rather than proving that the humanitarian system is consistently localizing effectively or more efficiently, WLOs' constant adaptations to decreasing funding and increasing needs are instead evidence of how much risk, labor, and responsibility are being transferred to WLOs. The interviews suggest that in most cases, these adaptations are occurring without a corresponding increase in funding, decision-making power, or institutional support. This approach raises questions about whether localization and humanitarian reform efforts are adequately resourcing the local actors they increasingly rely upon.

Despite WLOs continuing to adapt in extraordinary ways, many leaders warned that they are reaching the limit of what can realistically be sustained. Across interviews, WLOs repeatedly described operating in "survival mode," with little or no capacity for long-term strategic planning or investment in organizational growth. In fact, their survival strategies are even undermining their long-term viability as funding cuts force them to give up office space, senior staff, and fundraising expertise. WLOs shared that rather than focusing on how to grow, how to improve services, or how to truly address the most important needs of women and girls, organizational survival has become the main objective.

Most WLOs expressed real concern over the likely closure of many WLOs and even the collapse of the networks and systems that WLOs operate within if funding does not improve. Participants noted that if WLOs disappear, this would not only result in a loss of critical services. It would also mean the erasure of years of community trust, gender responsive organizing, and localization of expertise.

Community members in Honduras come together during the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence campaign. Photo: CPTRT.



HONDURAS:

The Cost of Rolling Back Women's Rights

*Name has been changed to protect participant's privacy.

For Nicole, a long-time women's rights activist, and others like her in Honduras, the US funding cuts have been crippling. "We are going to be forced to shut down safe spaces." For years, these safe spaces have provided shelter and protection to the women most at risk of gender-based violence. And despite a hustle to find new donors, she says there are none in the space of gender equality. "We have no money, but for us that does not mean abandoning debate or political discussion." Martha says that most women in Honduras working on women's rights or gender equality are now forced to work on a volunteer basis. They go for long periods without receiving any remuneration, but they are determined not to let the social fabric and political debate on gender rights collapse.

To help sustain her organization, Nicole has taken on consulting work and contributes half of her income to keep its feminist work going. In her view, the loss of funding has triggered a painful setback, undermining years of progress in the fight for women's rights in Honduras. "We are now being pushed to go back to age-old grassroots fundraising methods." She says that when she started her work decades ago with a women's network in San Pedro, the women would sell soy bread, tamales, and [other food] to fundraise. Years later she finds herself and other organizations re-adopting that model. "We have turned to grassroots fundraising and community organizing. Selling tamales, coconut bread, food, organizing community food sales just to raise enough money."

As resources have become scarcer, Nicole says the competition has intensified further. Larger organizations and international NGOs are now competing with WLOs and other grassroots organizations for the limited funding available. "These are large organizations and we are not competing on equal terms. Plan International has become Plan Honduras and Oxfam Interfund is now Oxfam Honduras." Nicole says that they don't stand a chance against these international organizations.

"We have turned to grassroots fundraising and community organizing. Selling tamales, coconut bread, food, organizing community food sales just to raise enough money." –NICOLE*

Pushed to the corner by multiple factors stemming from US funding cuts, Nicole says they have had to massively scale back operations and close spaces. "When my office was shutting down, I was like, God, what am I going to do with all the things in the office? Who am I going to sell them to? Am I going to have to auction everything off?" I imagined myself surrounded by office furniture and equipment piled up in the yard. I felt completely overwhelmed."

Nicole says that these experiences point to a bigger and yet invisible impact of the funding cuts—the mental health of women. She says women continue to persevere amidst the pressures, but meanwhile their health takes a big hit. She says she herself has been struggling both physically and mentally but is grateful for the solidarity of the younger women and next generation of activists. "I cannot stand physically for long periods and have to limit myself to digital activism...but there are younger women out there putting their bodies on the line."

During protests on International Women's Day, Nicole reached out to a group of young women activists and apologized for not being able to join them physically. She was deeply touched by their response: "No, you already did your part. Now it is our turn."

And that, Nicole feels, is her biggest legacy, with or without funding. The funding cuts have laid bare the reality of intersectional oppression that women's rights activists have faced in Honduras and across the world for generations. If there is any silver lining, it is that the crisis has reminded women and women's groups of their collective strength, bringing them together to build alliances, raise funds collectively, and carry on the fight for equality and justice.

Implications

This research comes at a moment of urgency for the humanitarian system's architecture for funding WLOs and programming for women and girls. The announcement of the US government's allocation of \$2 billion to OCHA in December 2025³⁵ and another \$1.8 billion in May 2026³⁶—though only a fraction of the \$14.1 billion the US contributed to the humanitarian system in 2024³⁷—offered a fragile sense of hope that much-needed funding could reach WLOs after 12 months of program closures, staff layoffs, and uncertainty. Yet on average, only four percent³⁸ of the first 2026 US-OCHA reserve allocation was distributed directly to all national NGOs—compared to 45.4 percent of CBPF funding going to national NGOs in 2025.³⁹ For WLOs, this represents a regression of historic gains towards localization.

Changes in the humanitarian architecture are taking place at a time of an alarming global backlash on gender equality and women's rights,⁴⁰ where progress on gender equality has stagnated or regressed in 40 percent of countries,⁴¹ reported incidents of conflict-related sexual violence have doubled from 2024 to 2025,⁴² and feminist civil society leaders and humanitarian responders face ongoing attacks.⁴³ The experiences of WLOs—forced to the brink of survival while continuing to provide essential services to conflict-affected communities—should not be romanticized as a triumph of resilience, but recognized as an illustration of how unequal humanitarian systems continue to fall short of their responsibility to protect, uphold, and advance the rights and dignity of women and girls.

Funding going to national NGOs:



45.4%
of 2025 CBPF
funding



4%
of 2026 US-OCHA
reserve allocation

A woman distributes aid to people fleeing the military offensive in Ukraine, near the Ukraine/Moldova border. Photo: UN Women/ Aurel Obreja.



While the recent funding cuts have objectively been devastating, they have also highlighted structural issues that predate the current crisis. The Humanitarian Reset is an effort to respond to difficult fiscal realities. As the humanitarian system evolves, however, it will be important to ensure that reforms uphold the IASC Gender Policy and Accountability Framework,⁴⁴ and do not inadvertently deepen existing inequities by overlooking or excluding WLOs from key funding mechanisms and restructured decision-making. CBPFs have made important progress in increasing support to local organizations, however, they have also left out many WLOs from receiving direct funds in recent allocations; indeed, none of the 28 WLOs interviewed reported receiving funding from CBPFs.* Feminist funds and alternative, more equitable pooled fund models such as the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF) have shown promise in reaching WLOs,⁴⁵ although available funding is insufficient for the scale of the demand.⁴⁶

Adequate financial support is a basic necessity for organizational survival, without which, more meaningful participation in all levels of decision-making, coordination, and advocacy becomes challenging if not impossible. Words and commitments are not enough. As policymakers and humanitarian leadership negotiate the terms for new allocations for CBPFs from the US and other donors, there must be stronger safeguards to ensure direct, accessible, and sustained funding to WLOs and for programs to advance gender equality, SRHR, and women and girls' protection. Such safeguards are particularly important in the current policy environment, as the Trump administration has not only reinstated, but drastically expanded the Global Gag Rule through the Protecting Human Flourishing in Foreign Assistance (PHFFA) policy.⁴⁷ The PHFFA policy applies prohibitions and restrictions to all nonmilitary US foreign assistance funding for partners—including governments, multilateral agencies, and foreign and US NGOs—working on issues of gender, diversity, equity and inclusion, and reproductive health.

Donors and governments should also support policy frameworks that protect access to comprehensive SRHR services, sustain systems of protection, rather than individual projects or short-term interventions, and provide greater predictability for implementing partners, recognizing that repeated shifts in US policy regarding gender and reproductive healthcare assistance create uncertainty for WLOs and other organizations working to advance women's health, rights, and protection. Legislative efforts such as the Protecting Human Rights and Public Health in Foreign Assistance Act,⁴⁸ which would prohibit implementation of the PHFFA policy, offer one avenue for reducing uncertainty and safeguarding access to critical services.

When WLOs are not adequately resourced, the impact is not neutral. Health outcomes worsen, criminal networks step in, education gains are reversed, child marriage increases, and women and girls face heightened risks of violence,

Adequate financial support is a basic necessity for organizational survival, without which, more meaningful participation becomes challenging if not impossible.

*Not all participants were asked directly if they received any money from CBPFs. It is also possible that some organizations do not know the details of all their funding streams.

abuse, and exploitation.⁴⁹ The social consequences are far-reaching, lifelong, and multigenerational. For the humanitarian sector, the losses are structural and long term. WLOs have already lost essential expertise and staff with decades of experience. Many of the partnerships and relationships necessary for effective humanitarian response have weakened. Critical and interdependent protection systems for women and girls—including shelter, healthcare, legal assistance, and referral pathways—are collapsing. None of these core elements of successful humanitarian responses can be rebuilt easily, even if adequate funding were to come back tomorrow.

The millions of women and girls around the world who depend on WLOs for their survival and protection cannot afford a humanitarian response to austerity that does more to preserve large global institutions while allowing WLOs to absorb a disproportionate share of the costs. Throughout this research, WLOs described operating with limited access to direct funding, a lack of influence over decision-making, and increasing pressure to deliver essential services in some of the world's most challenging environments, despite diminishing resources. As humanitarian actors adapt to a period of severe financial strain, reforms should not focus solely on reducing budgets, projects, or coordination structures. Instead, they should seize the opportunity to transform longstanding imbalances in power and resources. They can do this by expanding direct funding mechanisms to local organizations and WLOs, diversifying funding through alternative pooled funds, and investing in the long-term institutional strength, expertise, and leadership of local WLOs. Doing so will help ensure that humanitarian systems emerge from this crisis not only with less funding, but fairer, more sustainable, and more responsive to the communities they serve.

When WLOs are not adequately resourced, the impact is not neutral.

Ukrainian women receive assistance at the Ukraine/Moldova border. Photo: UN Women/Aurel Obreja



Conclusion

The experiences of WLOs across Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Honduras, Lebanon, Sudan, and Ukraine reveal the extraordinary commitment of local women leaders.

The experiences of WLOs across Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Honduras, Lebanon, Sudan, and Ukraine reveal the extraordinary commitment of local women leaders. Faced with devastating funding cuts, WLOs have adapted in creative ways, often at significant personal and organizational cost. But the humanitarian system should not interpret the continued survival of some WLOs as evidence that current approaches are working or are sustainable. Indeed,

many WLOs only remain operational because their leaders and staff are absorbing enormous physical, emotional, and financial stress.

The findings of this research demonstrate that while funding cuts are the main reason for many of the challenges currently faced by WLOs, the cuts are also exposing flaws in the humanitarian system.

Years of global commitments on localization, gender-responsive humanitarian action, and support for women's leadership have not translated to sufficient changes in how resources or power are allocated. When funding is cut, WLOs are often the first to feel the effects and the last to be included if and when funding resumes.

The costs of this flawed system show up in WLOs barely surviving during these recent funding cuts—the most severe in the history of the humanitarian sector. They are visible in the burnout and loss of staff, the erosion of trust, and the reduction of services critical for women and girls in humanitarian settings.

The solution to many of these problems, which have been exacerbated by the funding cuts of 2025, is not to make WLOs more resilient. It is to ensure the reformed humanitarian architecture recognizes the value of WLOs and adequately supports them so that they do not have to make such significant sacrifices to survive. WLOs provide unique and lifesaving services to women and girls in humanitarian contexts, as well as to families and communities. Protecting and strengthening WLOs must therefore be understood as a prerequisite for effective, accountable, and sustainable humanitarian responses.



A woman works on clothing in a multi-purpose women's center in Cox's Bazar.
Photo: UN Women/
Naimuzzaman Prince.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

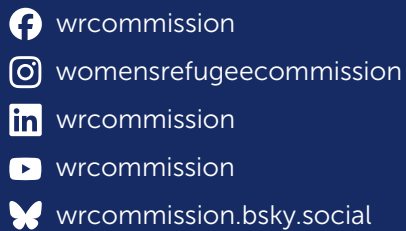
CBO	Community-based organization
CBPF	Country-based pool funds
GBV	Gender-based violence
IDPs	Internally displaced people
INGO	International nongovernmental organization
KII	Key informant interview
MHPSS	Mental health and psychosocial support
NGO	Nongovernmental organization
OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
RI	Refugees International
SRHR	Sexual and reproductive health and rights
UHF	Ukraine Humanitarian Fund
US	United States
USAID	US Agency for International Development
WLOs	Women-led organizations
WPHF	Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund
WRC	Women's Refugee Commission
WRO	Women's rights organization

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