



Women responders

Placing local action at the centre of humanitarian protection programming

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND GUIDANCE NOTE



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Executive summary

In light of commitments to localisation in ‘The Grand Bargain’ in 2016, recent years have seen increasing discourse on how the aid community can transform the humanitarian system and shift towards preparedness and response that are driven by local actors. In parallel, rather than simply viewing women and girls as passive beneficiaries of assistance, there has been growing recognition of the role women and girls play in actively responding to crises.

However, the extent to which the discourse on both women’s leadership and localisation has been translated into more meaningful collaboration between international actors and national and local women responding to crises varies considerably.

Within this context, this global research study aims to answer a key question:

‘How is the humanitarian protection sector ensuring the participation and leadership of women responders?’

‘Women responders’ refers to individual women volunteers, activists, leaders, women-led groups, organisations* and networks.

Summary of recommendations

Based on the research findings, this paper recommends the following to not only increase the participation and leadership of women responders, but to improve humanitarian response overall:

- ***Humanitarian actors should support protection strategies by recognising and engaging with women’s experiences and priorities***

The term ‘protection’ is an often-misunderstood term which doesn’t necessarily translate well into the complex realities of people’s lives. Women’s own understandings of protection are strongly gendered, context-specific and deeply personal. Women responders act upon their own understanding and meaning of protection, which may differ to standard humanitarian definitions – humanitarian actors should recognise this and engage with women and women responders accordingly.

- ***Humanitarian actors should collaborate with women responders to make humanitarian responses more effective***

Collaboration with women responders is not a panacea for humanitarian protection programming and brings with it complexity. Yet failing to collaborate with women responders represents a significant missed opportunity to make humanitarian response more contextualised and effective. The value of collaborating with women responders not only on longer-term programming but also humanitarian protection needs to be recognised.

- ***Agencies should formally engage with women responders to emphasise the value of their contribution***

There are perceptions across international humanitarian response that senior management seldom values the contribution of women-led organisations. This highlights the importance of formalising this type of engagement through partnerships and regional and country strategies while clearly communicating to staff the value of collaboration with women responders.

- ***Agencies should learn from existing good practice***

Promising practices of collaboration do exist and should be built upon, including supporting links between women responders from the grassroots to the international levels, and investing in emergency preparedness. Many examples of good practice are outlined in this report. There is significant learning for the sector in the approaches of partnership-focused international non-governmental organisations (INGOs).

- ***Barriers to women responders’ participation should be removed***

Women responders face significant barriers in collaborating with humanitarian actors. Actions should be taken to remove barriers to participation in coordination and decision-making spaces. Humanitarian actors should change policies, procedures and ways of working to enable forms of partnership that put women responders at the centre of humanitarian protection programming.

* A women-led organisation was understood to be an organisation which is led by a woman and/or women make up the majority of leadership positions, and which is working to support the practical and/or strategic needs of women and girls.

Key findings

HOW ARE WOMEN RESPONDERS MITIGATING AND RESPONDING TO PROTECTION RISKS?

Self-protection

Women are active in responding to the protection risks they and others face in crises in diverse ways, whether as individual volunteers, leaders and activists, or in women-led groups, organisations or networks. Self-protection strategies are often a first action, drawing on resources that a woman has available.

Organising collectively

Women often organise collectively in informal groups: CARE's mapping of women's groups in Syria found cases of women in blocks of flats grouping together so that some could take care of the children in the daytime, enabling others to look for work or collect food distributions.

Identifying and meeting needs on the ground

Women-led organisations include those established in response to crises in contexts such as Syria and Yemen, and those that normally carry out longer-term work, but which respond to emerging or recurring crises in the contexts in which they operate. The actions of women-led organisations in crises often both meet women's practical needs and target the root causes of gender inequality. This may be in parallel, for example, by providing material support and supporting women's leadership training. These activities can also shift over time according to needs and opportunities. In doing so, they may span across traditional agency classifications.

HOW DO WOMEN RESPONDERS CONTRIBUTE TO MORE CONTEXTUALISED AND EFFECTIVE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE?*

Collaboration with women-led groups and organisations is often seen to take place when a crisis is over and development work starts. This research shows that women responders also make diverse contributions to humanitarian programming, extending beyond protection outcomes to contribute to a more contextualised and effective humanitarian response overall.

Six core contributions of women responders

The research identifies six core ways in which women responders are able to contribute to more contextualised and effective humanitarian protection interventions.

Six core contributions of women responders

1. The **access** women responders may have, permitting them not only to act as first responders, but also support more marginalised populations.
2. The contextual **understanding** women responders bring to the needs and realities of different groups, of how to engage with key stakeholders and their ability to respond creatively to barriers.
3. Their ability to use social capital and networks to **reach** other women.
4. Being able to provide a space for and **raise women's voices** and support women's **leadership**.
5. Being able to provide **solidarity** to other women and girls in day-to-day spaces and activism.
6. Contributing to interventions being gender **transformative** and potentially more **sustainable**.

Improving protection for all – avoiding missed opportunities

The contributions of different women responders vary, with grassroots women leaders, groups and organisations able to support and respond in ways distinct from larger national women-led organisations and movements. Women responders can also represent or collaborate with local organisations and movements of persons with disabilities or sexual and gender minorities. Failing to collaborate with women responders in humanitarian preparedness and response represents a significant missed opportunity in achieving protection for all communities affected by crises.

HOW ARE HUMANITARIAN ACTORS ENGAGING WITH AND ENSURING THE PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN RESPONDERS?

For many international humanitarian actors, the extent to which they engage with and ensure the participation and leadership of women responders is unclear. This research identified seven ways in which humanitarian actors collaborated with women responders in protection programming. These ranged from training and support for grassroots women's groups; through collaboration in emergency preparedness; to partnership with women-led organisations in direct service provision.

* In the report, CARE grappled with the implications of asking this question, as it implies we are questioning women's added value. In this study, we recognise that there is an inherent value in collaborating with and supporting women responders. As 50 per cent of the population, and those affected by humanitarian crises, women should be supported to equally participate in decision making and lead interventions which affect their lives. At the same time, we recognise that there is value in documenting and synthesising evidence of how collaborating with and supporting women responders can strengthen humanitarian preparedness and response, as this value is not yet recognised by all humanitarian actors.

No single approach to partnership

INGOs did not share a single approach to partnership in humanitarian response, undertaking a mixture of direct service delivery and implementation via partnerships. Collaboration with women-led organisations therefore also varied. When partnerships were formed, the structure of approaches largely depended on the organisation's approach to partnership; for example, whether partnerships were based on a project-based sub-granting model or organisations developed longer-term relationships.

Valuing women's contribution and reconsidering partnership selection criteria

Where partnerships occurred, they were often facilitated by the advocacy of individuals within INGOs who valued the specific contributions of women responders. Conversely, partnerships have not been developed, or there has been resistance, in instances where senior staff did not value collaboration with women-led organisations. This is influenced by the context of a humanitarian system, which values reaching a large number of beneficiaries in the most cost-effective way. This often translates to signing a smaller number of agreements with larger civil society organisation (CSO) partners, which are less likely to be women-led organisations. Similarly, partnership selection criteria used by INGOs may favour organisations which are able to comply with due diligence and grant requirements over technical experience and expertise.

WHAT CHALLENGES DO WOMEN RESPONDERS FACE IN ENGAGING WITH INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN ACTORS?

Although promising practices exist, women responders face significant challenges in engaging with humanitarian actors. These include barriers that limit women's participation in decision making more widely, such as restrictions on women's mobility, harassment and social norms which assert that women are not capable to be leaders. These challenges are amplified for more marginalised individuals, such as women's disabled people's organisations and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) groups.

Practical barriers

There is often a lack of consideration for the practical barriers that women responders face. Women are rarely compensated for their time and when engagement does happen, it can be tokenistic.

Threats or violence

Women responders are also often at greater risk of threats or violence, as they may be challenging gender norms. This research wasn't able to identify examples

where international actors had budgeted for contingency funds to support partners to cover emergency costs in case of threats.

Sub-granting models

The predominance of sub-granting models undermines the quality of partnerships, with women-led organisations only being involved after a proposal has been developed. This challenge applies to CSOs more widely.

Key recommendations

WHAT HUMANITARIAN RESPONDERS SHOULD DO

Recommendations for humanitarian protection response (based on a CARE Guidance Note developed from findings of this research):

Principle One: See women as the experts in their situation

Recognise that women responders, whether individual leaders, grassroots groups or national organisations, have a nuanced and intimate understanding of their needs, including the protection risks that affect them and other women in their circumstances. This, and the actions women responders take to support themselves and others, may not always sit neatly with humanitarian and development divides or with sector definitions. Humanitarian actors should intentionally and systematically listen to and consider women's voices and be flexible in working outside sector definitions and divides when required.

Principle Two: Respect the priorities of women-led groups and organisations

Women-led organisations may wish to become involved in humanitarian response, but face barriers. Equally, as a women's rights organisation with a longer-term agenda in a country, an organisation may not wish to become involved for fear of it detracting from that work. At the grassroots level, women responders can face too many time pressures to take on additional roles. Collaborating with women responders necessitates asking about an individual, a group or an organisation's wishes and priorities for participation and then respecting these.

Principle Three: Compensate for women's time and remove barriers to access

Women responders are often highly motivated and give their time freely. Although the principle of volunteerism is important, it should be implemented realistically, with women compensated appropriately, recognising that they often have unpaid caring responsibilities. Actively consider barriers to access and participation for different women responders at all levels and actions

that can be taken to reduce these. Wherever possible, consult women-led organisations and groups on barriers, potential actions and the resources required.

WHAT DONORS SHOULD DO

Promote women-led partnerships

Donors can play a key role in communicating the value of women-led partnerships and pushing collaboration forward. They also need to hold international non-governmental organisations accountable for the quality of partnerships. Donors should therefore consider evaluating INGOs who partner with woman-led organisations on criteria such as:

- Whether core costs are reasonably shared with the women-led organisation;
- Whether capacity-building support is budgeted for;
- Whether the INGO has a strategy for meaningful capacity building, such as through accompaniment rather than one-off training;
- Whether the INGO budgets for contingency funds to support women-led organisations and their staff in event of an emergency; and
- Whether provision is included for staff care, to prevent and support those affected by secondary trauma and burn out.

Make deliberate efforts to reach women-led groups and organisations in humanitarian crises

Donors should take an intentional approach in how their funding mechanisms are structured and not assume that funding will reach women-led groups and organisations. Learning from research by the OECD DAC Network on Gender Equality ('Donor support to Southern women's rights organisations: OECD findings', 2016), donors should:

- Ensure that women-led organisations are not competing with international humanitarian actors in the same funding windows;
- Earmark a percentage of funding for women-led organisations;
- Use a mix of funding mechanisms to reach different sized organisations, from grassroots groups to national and regional women-led organisations; and
- Strengthen internal monitoring systems to track the percentage and type of funding in crises reaching women-led groups and organisations.

Balance humanitarian response and social justice funding

- While recognising that humanitarian response needs to be prioritised in a crisis, donors should avoid putting women-led organisations in a position where they are unable to mobilise around the opportunities for positive social change that crises can provide.
- Donors should support women-led organisations to continue longer-term work according to their own priorities and adapt to the changing context, including by retaining funding pots for such work.

Guidance Note – Recommendations for meaningful collaboration with women responders in protection programming

Guiding principles

Given the diversity in humanitarian response, the following principles are designed to guide approaches towards all different forms of engagement with women responders in protection programming

<p>Principle One: See women as the experts in their situation</p>	<p>Recognise that women responders, whether individual leaders, grassroots groups or national organisations, have a nuanced and intimate understanding of their needs, including the protection risks that affect them and other women in their circumstances. This, and the actions women responders take to support themselves and others, may not always sit neatly with humanitarian and development divides or with sector definitions. Humanitarian actors should intentionally and systematically listen to and consider women’s voices and be flexible in working outside sector definitions and divides when required.</p>
<p>Principle Two: Respect the priorities of women-led groups and organisations</p>	<p>Women-led organisations may wish to become involved in humanitarian response, but face barriers. Equally, as a women’s rights organisation with a longer-term agenda in a country, an organisation may not wish to become involved for fear of it detracting from that work. At the grassroots level, women responders can face too many time pressures to take on additional roles. Collaborating with women responders necessitates asking about an individual, a group or an organisation’s wishes and priorities for participation and then respecting these.</p>
<p>Principle Three: Compensate for women’s time and remove barriers to access</p>	<p>Women responders are often highly motivated and give their time freely. Although the principle of volunteerism is important, it should be implemented realistically, with women compensated appropriately, recognising that they often have unpaid caring responsibilities. Actively consider barriers to access and participation for different women responders at all levels and actions that can be taken to reduce these. Wherever possible, consult women-led organisations and groups on barriers, potential actions and the resources required.</p>

Collaborating with grassroots women responders

<p>Ask ‘How do women organise here?’ and ‘What do women do to protect themselves and others?’</p> <p>Whether in a camp, host community or other setting, in any assessment identify formal and informal women’s groups. Often these will be involved in some basic income generating activity. Ask ‘Who are the trusted women or women leaders’ and ‘How do women organise here?’ Identify existing locally-led protection actions.</p>	<p>Example: CARE is piloting a process called ‘Women Lead’, which identifies the ways in which women are involved in humanitarian response and how their leadership can be supported. The pilot was developed in recognition of the fact that Rapid Gender Analyses undertaken by CARE in previous responses should have focused more on women’s existing and potential participation.</p>	<p>Assessment</p>
<p>Consider how different protection interventions can engage with and support grassroots women responders</p> <p>This includes supporting safe spaces, where women can come together. Ensure that a risk analysis is incorporated into protection activities to mitigate and manage risks women may face in supporting others and challenging social norms.</p>	<p>Example: In the Democratic Republic of Congo, IRC trained women’s community-based organisations (CBOs) to provide case management services. A 2017 assessment found that CBOs that had not received support from IRC since 2012 were still able to provide these services with no external support.</p>	<p>Design</p>

<p>Remove barriers to participation</p> <p>Ask the question ‘What do we need to do to ensure women can participate meaningfully?’ Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practical barriers: e.g. location, access, time (length of meeting, time of day), language (spoken language, use of jargon); • Structural barriers: e.g. social norms that limit women’s attendance and participation; and • Specific barriers for marginalised individuals, including access for women and girls with disabilities. 	<p>Example: ActionAid’s research in four countries identified recommendations from women to enable their participation in humanitarian leadership. These included building an enabling environment for lactating mothers to enable them to participate and providing functional literacy programmes alongside emergency relief efforts.¹</p>	Setup
<p>Facilitate engagement with wider community members</p> <p>Collaborating with women responders not only entails engaging with women; indeed, there is the risk that women alone may be seen as ‘responsible’ for mitigating the protection risks women and girls face. Engage therefore with different groups and leaders, while ensuring that space is retained for women’s voices and experiences.</p>	<p>Example: In the DRC, Oxfam establishes Women’s Forums alongside Community Protection Committees to provide a separate space where women consider protection risks that affect them and identify actions they wish to take. These are then discussed with the mixed-sex Community Protection Committees and included in Community Protection Plans.²</p>	Implementation
<p>Don’t limit collaboration with women responders to focusing only on the protection risks women and girls face</p> <p>Recognise also that women responders may be taking actions on wider issues and protection risks that affect others.</p>	<p>Example: Members of the DRC’s Women’s Forums (outlined above) advocated with local authorities on protection risks affecting different groups, from arbitrary arrest to illegal taxation.³ The women’s rights organisations Rasan and Women’s Rehabilitation Organisation have tailored their services to also support LGBTIQ and male survivors of violence.⁴</p>	
<p>Facilitate connections</p> <p>Humanitarian actors can play a facilitating role in supporting sometimes challenging connections between women responders and others. This includes, for example, connections between grassroots women’s groups and national women-led organisations, and with key stakeholders, such as authorities or other international actors.</p>	<p>Example: In Gaza, in the aftermath of the conflict in 2014, action researchers supported by Oxfam saw the needs of women with disabilities were not being met. Oxfam supported the formation of a coalition of four women’s sector organisations and four disabled people’s organisations to assess gaps in services and design an emergencies preparedness plan.⁵</p>	
Partnering with women-led organisations		
<p>Recognising value</p> <p>Senior management should take the lead in recognising the value of collaborating with women-led organisations. They should communicate with staff, specifying that such partnerships be included in emergency response, not just in longer-term programmes. Formalise these commitments in partnership strategies (whether for a country/ regional office or an organisation’s humanitarian strategy).</p>	<p>Example: As part of CARE’s Regional Middle East and North Africa Road Map, each country office is required to partner with one new women-led organisation per year. This could be built upon to track key metrics – such as the amount of funding women-led organisations receive and length and quality of these partnerships.</p>	Strategies

¹ ActionAid International (2016). ‘On the frontline: Catalysing women’s leadership in humanitarian action’.

² Barakat, S and Kesmaecker-Wissing, M (2017). ‘Community protection structures: Influencing for local-level change in conflict settings in the DRC’. Oxfam Policy & Practice.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Chynoweth, S (2018). ‘Caring for male and LGBTI sexual violence survivors: Learning from local organisations’. *Forced Migration Review*, Issue 57.

⁵ Chilvers, R (2017). ‘Civil society-led emergency preparedness for women with disabilities in Gaza’. Oxfam Policy & Practice.

<p>Mapping and understanding the context</p> <p>Draw from different sources to informally identify different women-led organisations and find out about the dynamics of the women’s movement in a country. Bring staff working in development into these conversations.</p>	<p>Example: In mapping organisations, it is important to consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal groupings and organisations; • The political affiliations of organisations; • Organisations that may be more conservative; • Alliances and divisions between organisations; • Urban versus rural organisations; and • Who may be excluded. 	Ways of working
<p>Selection criteria</p> <p>In deciding partner selection criteria, do not only consider organisational capacity to deliver and comply with project requirements, but also experience in gender and protection, contextual knowledge, and relationships with key stakeholders including community members.</p>	<p>Example: CARE’s study on gender sensitive partnerships revealed that it tends to select partners for their emergency response experience and compliance capacity, rather than their expertise in protection or gender equality.⁶</p>	Policies & Procedures
<p>Invest in organisations</p> <p>Women-led organisations often have weaker organisational procedures and systems. Budget for organisational support, drawing on good practice such as mentoring and secondments, rather than one-off training sessions. Ensure an organisation’s own priorities are the starting point for a two-way conversation. Coordinate with other organisations in the development of support plans and investment to avoid duplication.</p>	<p>Example: The START Network ‘Shifting the Power’ project developed the SHAPE Framework,⁷ which aims to support organisations to assess their capacity to manage humanitarian programmes and influence response. The ‘Protection in Practice’ project provided flexible grants to organisations to strengthen protection capacity and trialled WhatsApp reporting to reduce the reporting burden.</p>	Funding
<p>Funding and projects</p> <p>Budget and share funding for core organisational costs fairly with partners. In developing a project, do not come with a pre-set agenda; rather, develop a plan jointly. Consider what emergency funding may be needed (e.g. for transport, accommodation for those at risk) and budget accordingly.</p>	<p>Example: CARE used a £20,000 corporate funding grant to develop a partnership with Lebanese women’s rights organisation, RDFL. RDFL commented that the project was developed according to what it needed, eventually focusing on support for social workers in self-care techniques.</p>	Funding
<p>Flexibility in partnership</p> <p>Retain flexibility in the partnership agreement. If the context changes, or a partner is not willing to take the risk of operating in a specific area, work together with the partner to develop a different strategy. This may include shifting a partnership from direct project implementation to focusing on skills strengthening for a period of time.</p>	<p>Example: Trocaire signs memoranda of understanding with organisations that go beyond the lifetime of a project. Core funding is used to support a partner’s minimum operating costs between projects.</p>	Policies & Procedures
<p>Participation and visibility</p> <p>Actively support the participation of women-led organisations in decision making and coordination spaces, according to their priorities. Raise the visibility of these groups and support the development of their networks – for example, with donors.</p>	<p>Example: As part of the ‘Safe from the Start’ project,⁸ CARE facilitated women-led organisations, including Hope Restoration South Sudan, to participate in a global UN High Commissioner for Refugees consultation meeting on localisation of gender-based violence interventions and the ECHO annual meeting of partners for the Call to Action on GBV in emergencies.</p>	Ways of working

⁶ CARE International (2017). ‘Gender and localising aid: The potential of partnerships to deliver’.

⁷ ‘Strategic Humanitarian Assessment and Participatory Empowerment’.

⁸ Funded by the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (BPRM), US Department of State.

Facilitating engagement with minority groups		
<p>Recognise that LGBTIQ organisations and groups may not be involved in humanitarian response, but are able to provide important input and recommendations on how to mitigate the risks LGBTIQ individuals face in crises. In engagement, prioritise the safety of such individuals and reach out to national organisations and networks for their advice before looking for or engaging any local groups. Consider what role an international actor can play in facilitating the wider engagement of LGBTIQ organisations in humanitarian preparedness.</p>	<p>Example: At the Pacific Humanitarian Partnership meeting in Fiji in October 2017, UN Women and Diverse Voices and Action for Equality led a session on local and diverse humanitarian actors, including speakers from the Rainbow Pride Foundation and Pacific Rainbows Advocacy Network, examining the specific needs of diverse groups and benefits of inclusion.⁹</p>	
<p>Actively engage organisations and groups of women and girls with disabilities in preparedness and response, building upon existing activism.¹⁰ Remove barriers to participation at all levels, considering both mental and physical disability. Recognise that barriers for women and girls are not only physical, but may include lack of confidence, stigmatisation and lower levels of education.</p>	<p>Example: The Federation of Disability Organisations in Malawi is leading a project to identify innovative ways to involve persons with disabilities in disaster preparedness and response, tackling challenges such as how to ensure people who are visually impaired or have hearing difficulties can be alerted and supported if there is a risk of flooding. Malawi Human Rights for Women and Girls with a Disability and Disabled Women in Development establish groups for women and girls with disabilities to facilitate local advocacy.</p>	
Overall approaches to emergency response		
<p>Emergency preparedness</p> <p>Invest in the emergency preparedness of women-led organisations, so that they are positioned to respond in the event of a crisis. These groups may not identify as humanitarian organisations; this should not preclude collaboration if they are interested in humanitarian response.</p>	<p>Example: IRC is engaging with regional gender-based violence and women’s rights networks to train a network of national women-led organisations in emergency GBV preparedness and response.</p>	Preparedness
<p>Surge support</p> <p>Consider how surge staff support can be better used and resourced to facilitate collaboration with women-led organisations. This may include allocating time to development of partnerships and considering during recruitment what qualities are needed in staff to facilitate these ways of working.</p>	<p>Example: In Fiji, CARE mounted a joint response to Cyclone Winston with Live and Learn, in which surge staff were embedded within their organisation. In Bangladesh, IRC piloted deploying two coordinators, one of whom focused on developing collaboration with CSOs.</p>	Response
<p>Alternative means of engagement</p> <p>Where full partnerships aren’t possible, or in parallel, consider different means of collaboration. These could include inviting partners to co-facilitate staff training sessions, developing a consortium where a women-led organisation provides technical support to other mainstream partners, or fundraising from non-institutional donors to establish small, flexible pots of funding for specific initiatives.</p>	<p>Example: A Bangladeshi disability rights organisation saw that there were no facilities for persons with disabilities in the Kutupalong camp in Cox’s Bazar camp. They received a small amount of funding from Mama Cash’s Opportunity Fund to work with local authorities to improve disability access.</p>	Ways of working

⁹ Gender in Humanitarian Action Asia-Pacific Working Group (2017). ‘Integrating gender into humanitarian action: Good practices from Asia-Pacific 6’.

¹⁰ Actions should be in line with the guidance included in: CBM International, Bensheim, HelpAge International, and Handicap International (2018). ‘Humanitarian inclusion standards for older people and people with disabilities’.

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¹¹ OECD DAC Network on Gender Equality (2016). 'Donor support to Southern women's rights organisations: OECD findings'.



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PHOTOS

Front cover photo: Women at a CARE-run safe space at Potibonia camp, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh © Nancy Farese / CARE 2018