



# WE NEED TO KNOW THE HUMANITARIAN SECTOR STANDS WITH US

The active but  
underfunded role young  
women and girls play in crises

March 2024

**“The critical role played by grassroots organizations, including young women and gender non-conforming people, in responding to the humanitarian crisis in Sudan remains largely undocumented and untraceable. These initiatives often operate under the radar, relying on personal networks and community connections to carry out their essential work.”**

**- Doha, Sudan**

**“[We] do not want to compete [for funding] with an organization in Afghanistan for instance. I want every organization to get its money.”**

**- Yosh, Ukraine**

**“We need to know the humanitarian sector stands with us.”**

**- Heleena, Afghanistan**

**“We invite funders to think of crisis response as a moment in the movement’s work and not in isolation from the general political landscape and context. Response efforts should be co-created through participatory processes, centering girls and young people and remaining true to their local ownership.”**

**- Anonymous, Palestinian Activist**

# Acknowledgements

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# Acronyms & Definitions

**GBV:** Gender-Based Violence

**CBPF:** Country-Based Pooled Fund

**CERF:** UN's Central Emergency Response Fund

**GBV:** Gender-Based Violence

**FTS:** Financial Tracking Service (of UNOCHA)

**IASC:** Inter-Agency Standing Committee

**IATI:** International Aid Transparency Initiative

**INGO:** International Non-Governmental Organization

**OECD:** The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

**UN:** United Nations

**UNDP:** UN Development Programme

**UNFPA:** UN Population Fund

**UNICEF:** UN Children's Fund

**UNOCHA:** UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

**USAID:** United States Agency for International Development

**WPHF:** UN Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund

**Bilateral Agency/Organization:** A government aid agency of a single country that provides direct development/humanitarian assistance to recipient countries.

**Multilateral Agency/Organization:** An agency formed and funded by multiple countries.

**Cluster Approach:** A system to coordinate humanitarian action that spreads the responsibility for the delivery of services, so that no agency is singularly accountable for the entire response when a national government requests international support.

**Humanitarian Sector:** The ecosystem of international organizations and donors, which focuses on the needs of affected populations during or after an emergency, crisis or disaster, ensuring access to basic necessities and saving/improving lives.

**Localization:** The increasingly-accepted international agenda to spend more aid (development and humanitarian) directly via local organizations in developing countries.

**Women's and feminist funds:** A philanthropic organization, whose primary purpose is to provide financial support to organizations and groups advancing women rights, gender justice, and feminist efforts.

**Young women and girls:** Girlhood can be defined in a countless number of ways; age is only one possible marker. For the purposes of this report, we're using ages 13-30.

**Young feminists:** Young women and young individuals from across the gender spectrum who identify with a feminist political agenda/approaches and practices. For the purposes of this report, we're using ages 15-30.



# Executive Summary

Around the globe, we find ourselves amidst acute, escalating, and interconnected crises. Women’s rights organizations and young feminist movements are at the forefront, responding to these crises and driving systemic change to tackle their root causes. Given the formal and informal structures young feminists utilize in how they organize to move with the speed and creativity required before, during, and after crises, it is important to bring a more nuanced understanding of their role in crisis response. With scant, disaggregated data within the humanitarian aid system, this report uses specific variables to triangulate where and how young women and girls appear within existing formal frameworks.<sup>1</sup> It also provides recommendations to better understand the role and impact of their organizing so we can move to a world where young feminists are fully resourced in the aftermath of a crisis.

Aid donors have increasingly recognized the role of local organizations and committed to supporting them directly. The role of young women and girls, and young feminists, as part of local responses to crises, has also been increasingly recognized – as have these crises’ impacts on them, ranging from increased risks of gender-based violence (also from aid workers) to threats to their sexual and reproductive rights. Along with overarching and long-standing commitments to ‘doing no harm’ with their funding, some donor governments in recent years have also officially adopted official ‘feminist foreign policies’. Unfortunately, there seems to be little evidence to suggest that those promises have materialized in significant, meaningful change on the ground.

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<sup>1</sup> Additional barriers within existing data are how categorizations that do exist ignore and invisibilize young individuals from across the gender spectrum. Based on the ways in which young feminists respond, we know that young women and young gender-expansive people co-organize together. Many do not identify openly due to their own context and as a safety measure, and the ways in which data is collected by large organizations and international aid agencies can ignore these distinctions too.

Our analysis shows, for instance, that:<sup>2</sup>

- Aid donors spent more than ten times more money on their own administrative costs (\$11.2 billion) than they did on women’s rights organizations (\$964 million) in 2022, according to the latest OECD data released at the end of 2023.
- Women’s rights organizations, movements and institutions received just 0.34% of total global aid flows in 2022 (down from 0.42% in 2020); in many countries in crisis, they received even less. In Ukraine, which received a historic \$29.4 billion in total aid in 2022, they got only about 0.05% of this (less than \$14.6 million).
- Overall, the leading ‘channel’ for humanitarian assistance was multilateral organizations (primarily UN agencies); about 20% of the total spending in 2022 went through NGOs and civil society but, looking at the details of that data, almost none of that (just 2%) went directly to those based in developing countries; almost all of it went through international NGOs and those based in donor countries.
- Less than 2% of total humanitarian assistance in 2022 went to projects tagged in the OECD’s database as having gender equality as their ‘principal’ objective. The US, the world’s largest aid donor, tagged almost none of their spending like this.
- Girls are not even mentioned in most records of humanitarian spending – only 85 of more than 24,000 project records in 2022 mentioned ‘girls’ in their titles, and even in many of these cases they often do not appear to be the focus; they’re often referenced along with other groups (ex. “girls, boys, women and men”).

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<sup>2</sup> According to our analysis of the latest OECD data uploaded 22 December 2023. See the Following the Money section of this report for more information.

- Meanwhile, there is also evidence that some humanitarian aid has supported conservative groups opposing sexual and reproductive rights.<sup>3</sup>

Current international aid accounting systems do not enable easy tracking of donor commitments and funding specific to young women and girls in crises. Therefore, this report uses multiple data points and proxies to interrogate this support, including aid information published in the OECD Development Assistance Committee’s Creditor Reporting System (CRS) database; to the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) open data standard; and by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)’s Financial Tracking Service. It also shares insights from new interviews with experts and activists in three case study countries – Afghanistan, Sudan and Ukraine – which reflect the role of young women and girls, and young feminists, in humanitarian responses and the challenges they face in accessing resources from the same international aid system that’s pledged to support them among other local actors.

These findings echo other research that has shown a lack of data that is disaggregated by age and gender in the humanitarian sector, and within international aid more generally<sup>4</sup>; accountability gaps in responding to sexual abuse by humanitarian workers for international agencies and NGOs; as well as challenges faced by women working in this sector.<sup>5</sup> These trends represent systemic failures in the international response to humanitarian crises that must and can be corrected. To support more gender-just responses to crises, this report critically analyzes the status quo, and what’s needed to change it, from an intersectional feminist perspective that prioritizes historically marginalized groups having the resources they need to build resilience.

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3 See the Other Actors in Crises section of this report for more information.

4 See also: [Resourcing Girls to Thrive: Research exploring funding adolescent girls’ rights 2023](#), p.33-37.

5 See the Background section of this report for more information.



# 01 / Introduction

Young women and girls, and young feminists, have been on the frontlines of responding to humanitarian crises around the world. In Afghanistan, they have helped to run health clinics and food assistance projects; in Sudan, they have helped to establish 'emergency rooms' providing medical, psychosocial and other essential services for survivors of gender-based violence; in Ukraine, they have opened and managed shelters for women and children displaced by the conflict. These are just some examples, from the three case studies in this report, of how young women and girls, and young feminists, are actors in humanitarian responses worldwide – though they have not received the attention they deserve and the funding they need.

"If the Taliban are becoming stricter and stricter, women are becoming smarter and smarter", said Negin Yari, a feminist activist and Chair of the Women Advisory Group to the Humanitarian Country Team in Afghanistan, in an interview for this report. She accused international humanitarian actors of adopting a harmful 'practical approach' in complying with Taliban edicts and leaving many initiatives led by women, including young women, struggling to access the support they need.

In Sudan, young women "led the revolution" that led to the fall of the dictator Omar al-Bashir in 2019 – but since then, they have been "sidelined and are now being punished by the male-dominated political marketplace," said Reem Abbas, a young Sudanese feminist activist. In another interview for this report, she argued: "Sudanese women need safety and protection... They also need to be represented in the institutions that are well resourced and have more decision-making power."



Yosh, a co-founder of the Feminist Workshop – a collective of young feminist, gender non-conforming (GNC) and queer activists in Lviv, Ukraine – asserted: “I do not want to compete [for funding] with an organization in Afghanistan, for instance”. They described how the group opened shelters for displaced women and children in the city, on the border with Poland. Within eight months, however, one of these was forced to close due to a lack of funding – despite the billions in aid sent to Ukraine.

Ukraine is the only one of the three case studies examined in this report to have received more than half (almost 70%) of the requested funding from donors to the UN’s coordinated humanitarian appeal for the country in 2023.<sup>6</sup> The UN-coordinated humanitarian appeals for Afghanistan and Sudan received less than half of their requested funding. Needs exceed resources, overall. However, the contrast for projects led by, or focusing on the needs of, young women and girls appears particularly stark.

The financial data on humanitarian aid spending analyzed in this report echoes the observations of the women, including young women, we interviewed. “Young women” were not even mentioned in any of the descriptions of thousands of humanitarian aid projects in Afghanistan, Sudan or Ukraine with 2023 spending records published to the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI).<sup>7</sup> Globally, as detailed in this report’s follow-the-money analysis: women’s rights organizations continue to receive very small shares of international aid budgets, including in contexts of crisis; only a small fraction of humanitarian aid projects focus on gender equality; and girls and young women very rarely show up as the focus of humanitarian aid projects.<sup>8</sup>

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6 See the Case studies section of this report for more detail.

7 See the Case studies section of this report for more detail.

8 See the Following the Money section of this report for more detail.

Palestine is another current crisis context that reflects these trends. Women's rights groups have received less than 0.4% of total aid to Gaza and the West Bank for years, according to research published in February 2024 by the Institute for Journalism and Social Change. Along with the US (which reported spending just about \$78,000 directly on these groups in 2013-2014, and nothing at all since then), six European countries did not give any of their aid directly to them in 2022.<sup>9</sup> Other sectors that got particularly small shares of aid to Palestine in 2022 (total: \$2.4 billion) included 'Ending violence against women and girls' (\$10 million) and 'Reproductive health care' (\$4 million).<sup>10</sup>

That research also showed how, overall, international aid for Palestine had decreased disproportionately over the decade leading up to the current war. By 2022, the US was spending about \$55 on military assistance for Israel for every \$1 on aid for Palestine.<sup>11</sup> Palestinian feminist activist Sandie Hanna said these findings underlined how "the spectrum of international response to genocides in Palestine has taught us, Palestinians, that 'crises' are manufactured. She described:

*"We have come to conclude that the recurrence of war and humanitarian aid, hand in hand, in a supremacist framework that is missing accountability only normalizes wars and encourages crisis capitalism and imperial expansion. The current aid mechanism in Gaza is barely aimed at 'helping' people navigate the crisis as if its role is to make genocide and torture 'tolerable' in many senses for the population...while ignoring the imperative ethical and moral obligation to achieve a political will and the ultimate goal of abolishing wars and man-made crises. The complex is patriarchal and colonial, condescending to Palestinians throughout its 'intervention', ignoring that the resources it hoards are the accumulation of hundreds of years of slavery, extraction, and exploitation."*

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9 Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Estonia, Poland, Slovak Republic.

10 "[Publications](#)". Institute of Journalism and Social Change website.

11 "[Publications](#)". Institute of Journalism and Social Change website.

Hanna also co-authored a separate report, released March 2024, focused on the resistance of Palestinian girls and young feminists and their role in responding to various threats to rights and basic needs. It describes, for instance, how they have been documenting the genocide, ensuring evidence is gathered and reaches the world. They've also led frontline response activities, including the distribution of 'dignity kits' (containing hygiene and other essential items). In the words of one of the other Palestinian activists interviewed by this report's co-authors:

*"We invite funders to think of crisis response as a moment in the movement's work and not in isolation from the general political landscape and context. Response efforts should be co-created through participatory processes, centering girls and young people and remaining true to their local ownership."*<sup>12</sup>

There is a long history of critical voices and scholarship on these principles and this sector, including its connections to colonial and imperial projects, which this report builds upon and enhances with new data analysis, case study research, and interviews. This report focuses primarily on the formal international humanitarian sector and aid spending, which is money from governments and public budgets, that is either spent directly or through intermediaries like UN agencies and primarily-large NGOs, and guided by what the UN describes as humanitarian action's "fundamental principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence."<sup>13</sup> There are also other actors in crises, including women's and feminist funds, as well as 'anti-gender' and 'anti-rights' actors that actively oppose gender justice. This report turns briefly to these actors too before drawing conclusions and presenting recommendations to humanitarian aid donors and other stakeholders.

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12 S Hanna, T Forrest, L Vergara. Towards Our Liberation: Palestinian Girls and Young Feminists Weaving Resistance and Hope (2024).

13 "Humanitarian principles". UNHCR website.

# 02 / Background

## The humanitarian sector

Every December, the UN launches its global coordinated appeal for humanitarian assistance in the following year. In December 2023, it estimated that nearly 181 million people in 72 countries globally would require humanitarian aid and protection in 2024. To support responses “ultraprioritized on the most urgent needs”, it called for \$46.4 billion in aid.<sup>14</sup> Budgets have been tightened, it said, citing a “growing funding gap [that] meant that support was cut back, and millions of people were not reached” in 2023.<sup>15</sup>

This aid appeal was launched by the UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) “on behalf of more than 1,900 humanitarian partners worldwide” – reflecting the size of the humanitarian sector as well as the UN’s central role.<sup>16</sup> UNOCHA was founded in 1991 to strengthen the international response to emergencies and disasters. It also oversees key mechanisms intended to enable rapid and coordinated responses to humanitarian crises – Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs) and the UN’s Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) – as well as an Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) on humanitarian response and a Financial Tracking Service (FTS) that publishes funding reports it has received or identified. Since 2005, it has implemented what is called the Cluster Approach to coordination, in which humanitarian actors are brought together under ‘clusters’ such as health or education.<sup>17</sup>

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14 About a third of the total called for is focused on just five countries: Syria (\$4.4 billion), Ukraine (\$3.1 billion), Afghanistan (\$3 billion), Ethiopia (\$2.9 billion) and Yemen (\$2.8 billion).

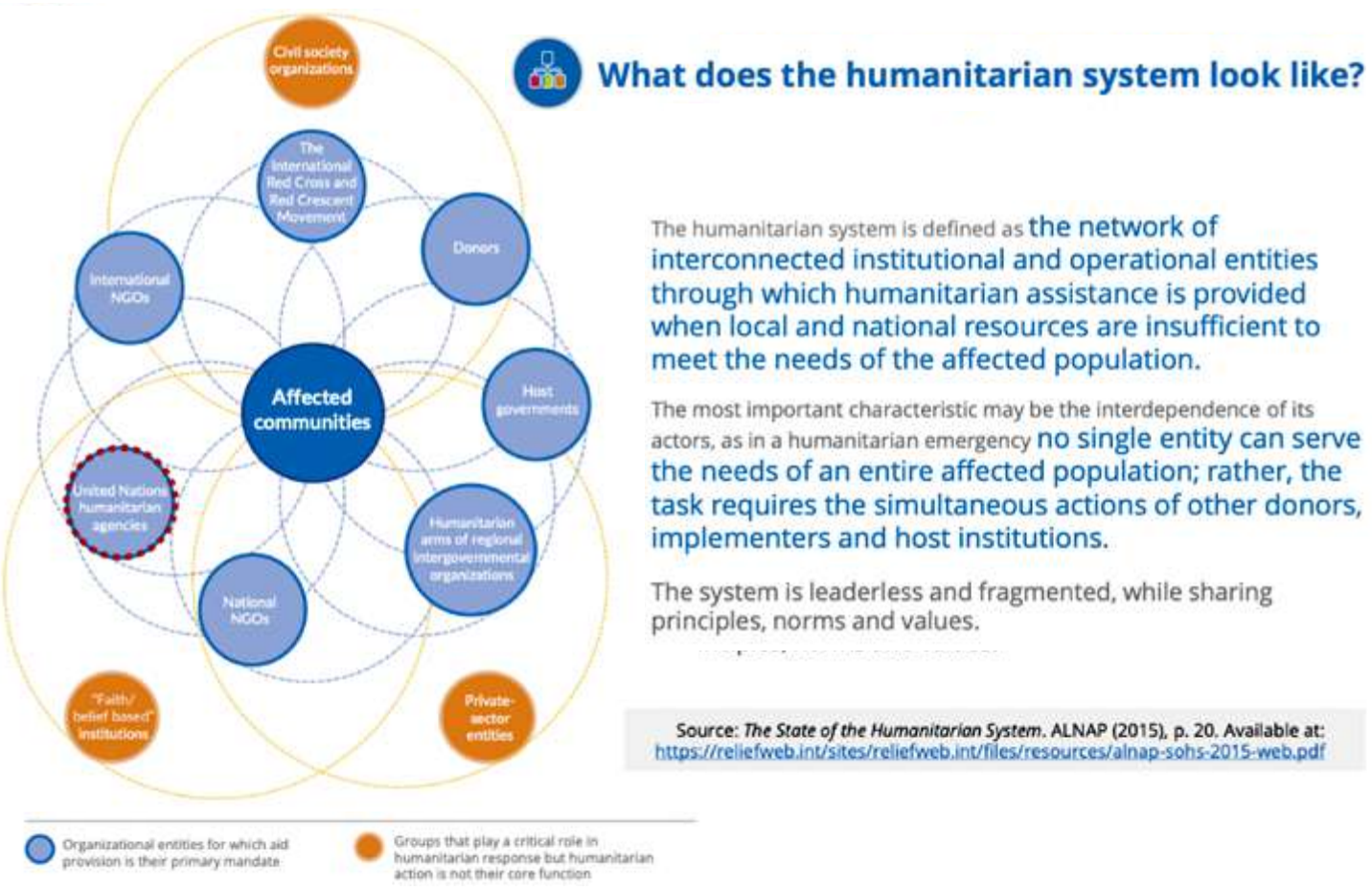
15 OCHA, “[Global Humanitarian Overview 2024: UN launches \\$46 billion appeal for 2024 as global humanitarian outlook remains bleak \[EN/AR\]](#)”. Relief Web (2023).

16 OCHA, “[Global Humanitarian Overview 2024: UN launches \\$46 billion appeal for 2024 as global humanitarian outlook remains bleak \[EN/AR\]](#)”. Relief Web (2023).

17 For more background on Clusters see p.11 in WFP Handbook: “Everything You Need to Know About the Humanitarian System: Handbook for New Employees”. World Food Programme (2018).

While the humanitarian sector is large, it has dominant actors and trends. A 2018 World Food Programme (WFP) Handbook for New Employees, entitled 'Everything You Need to Know About the Humanitarian System', described it as "leaderless and fragmented, while sharing principles, norms and values".<sup>18</sup> The WFP is among several UN entities that have primary roles in the delivery of relief assistance;<sup>19</sup> other key actors include the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and international non-governmental organizations (iNGOs) such as Doctors without Borders and Oxfam.

### Graphic: The humanitarian system



Screenshot from: 'Everything You Need to Know About the Humanitarian System: Handbook for New Employees', World Food Programme (2018)<sup>20</sup>

18 "Everything You Need to Know About the Humanitarian System: Handbook for New Employees". World Food Programme (2018).

19 Four UN entities have primary roles in the delivery of relief assistance: WFP plus UNDP (UN Development Programme), UNHCR (UN Refugee Agency), and UNICEF (UN Children's Fund).

20 "Everything You Need to Know About the Humanitarian System: Handbook for New Employees". World Food Programme (2018).

Key trends include traditional but contested humanitarian principles such as 'neutrality' and the long-standing and long-criticized under-funding of locally-based organizations. Those inside the sector are divided, as described by a 2016 report from the Overseas Development Institute's Humanitarian Practice Group (ODI HPG):

*"between those who feel that effective assistance rests on its exceptionalism through strict adherence to neutrality and impartiality, and those who accept a wider interpretation of their life-saving remit that includes addressing the causes of crises as well as their effects."*

That report also described how these principles, and their required apolitical universality, have been criticized as "fraught with Northern bias", and argued that "if this framework is upheld without an open debate, humanitarianism will continue to be seen as a label for... intervention" by actors from the Global North in the Global South.<sup>21</sup>

Humanitarian actors may be funded by both public and private contributions. Donor governments often have departments with specific responsibility for emergency aid, such as the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) at USAID.<sup>22</sup> Along with official aid flows (public money from donor governments), there are donations from the public and companies, grants from foundations and resources raised and spent by religious organizations. The WFP Handbook for New Employees mentioned above contained a whole slide on faith-based organizations, which it counted among the "key actors in the humanitarian system."<sup>23</sup> Echoing another long-criticized trend in the humanitarian sector, women's rights and feminist organizations were not even mentioned in the handbook.

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21 C. Bennett & M. Foley, "[Time to let go: Remaking humanitarian action for the modern era](#)". Overseas Development Institute (2016).

22 "[Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance \(BHA\)](#)". USAID.

23 "[Everything You Need to Know About the Humanitarian System: Handbook for New Employees](#)". World Food Programme (2018).

## Young women and girls, and young feminists, in crises

Young women and girls, and young feminists, are actors involved in responding to humanitarian crises around the world, as are women's rights and feminist organizations more broadly – though they can appear disconnected from formal humanitarian systems and spending. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, however, almost all feminist and women's funds have notably stepped in to rapidly fund responses to emergencies led by women, including young women and girls, and young feminists.<sup>24</sup> Examples of this include the emergence of the Global Resilience Fund (GRF) – a new, feminist pooled fund explicitly “working with and for girls and young feminists responding to crises”. Founded in 2020, since then it has moved more than \$2 million to these crisis response efforts – resourcing more than 320 groups led by girls and young feminists in more than 120 countries – primarily from donations by private philanthropic foundations.<sup>25</sup>

Other initiatives forefronting women and feminist principles in humanitarian action include the Feminist Humanitarian Network, which is “a global collective of feminist leaders working together to transform the humanitarian system into one that is guided by feminist principles.”<sup>26</sup> The UN Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF) is another example that funds local organizations led by women, including young women, and their activities to respond to crises, support the protection of women and girls, and accelerate peacebuilding and recovery efforts. Since its creation in 2016 it has mobilized \$130 million from 19 donors and supported over 900 civil society groups and women peacebuilders across 41 countries. In 2022, 44% were first-time recipients of UN funding.<sup>27</sup>

These sums of money are significant, yet they are very small in comparison to the total spent by official aid donors (bilateral and multilateral agencies together) on humanitarian assistance, which

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24 [“Responding to Feminist Movements During COVID-19”](#). Prospera International Network of Women's Funds.

25 [The Global Resilience Fund](#) website.

26 [The Feminist Humanitarian Network](#) website.

27 “Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2023”. Development Initiatives (2023), p.84.



was over \$36 billion in 2022 alone.<sup>28</sup> The formal humanitarian sector that these donors have primarily supported has faced long-standing criticisms for underfunding and even undercounting women and girls. They have also been called out for accountability gaps and unsatisfactory responses even to high-profile international scandals involving sexual abuse by aid workers.

Remarkably, only a third of 2022 UN-coordinated humanitarian appeals provided age- and gender-disaggregated data, showing the proportions of women and children per crisis, according to a 2023 report from research group Development Initiatives (DI). It stated that “these gaps were due to a lack of accountability for existing standards, a lack of gender-specific expertise and capacity in crisis contexts, and increasing data collection at the project level that is not being communicated to the cluster or wider system level.”<sup>29</sup> A separate DI report found that the share of official humanitarian assistance going to ‘gender-relevant responses’ was just 2.1% in 2021, with most provided by just ten donors (meaning that “a cut from just one could considerably impact the overall funding pot”).<sup>30</sup>

These facts contrast with increasing recognition of the multiple, compounding vulnerabilities faced by women and girls in crises. This is reflected, for example, in the many reports that have been written on gender-based violence (GBV) in the context of emergencies and displacement. A 2020 International Rescue Committee (IRC) survey of women from refugee, displaced and post-conflict settings across Africa, found that 73% of respondents had observed a rise in intimate partner violence; 51% cited more cases of sexual violence; 31% reported incidents when travelling to water points.<sup>31</sup> A separate IRC report argued that humanitarian actors cannot effectively address such gender-based violence if it also “persists within their own ranks.” It noted that obtaining funding was “a challenge that women- and girl-focused organizations are still struggling to overcome.” It called for meaningful change within the sector “informed by survivors” as well as “feminist analysis that seeks to redefine and redistribute unequal power relationships.”<sup>32</sup>

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28 According to the latest aid data uploaded 22 December 2023 to the [OECD DAC CRS database](#).

29 “[Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2023](#)”. Development Initiatives (2023).

30 “[Funding for gender-relevant humanitarian response](#)”. Development Initiatives (2022), p.16.

31 “[What Happened? How the Humanitarian Response to COVID-19 Failed to Protect Women and Girls](#)”. International Rescue Committee (2020).

32 “[Safety First: Time to deliver on commitments to women and girls in crisis](#) International Rescue Committee”. International Rescue Committee (2019).

Actors in the humanitarian sector have been implicated in repeated and high-profile sexual abuse scandals. In 2022, an author of an internal UN report on aid workers' sexual exploitation of refugee children in West Africa, more than twenty years ago, warned that "the need for independent accountability remains as high but the likelihood of it happening, ever more remote."<sup>33</sup> In 2018, when new scandals involving Oxfam UK and Save the Children UK came to light, official responses included a global safeguarding summit convened by the British government.<sup>34</sup> The OECD adopted a new Recommendation on Ending Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance in 2019.<sup>35</sup> Then, in 2020, The New Humanitarian exposed further, extensive sexual abuse by aid workers from the World Health Organization and other agencies in the Democratic Republic of Congo.<sup>36</sup> A 2021 Inter-Agency Standing Committee review found that the "pace of progress has not been steady" on these issues.<sup>37</sup> In 2022 the UK's Independent Commission on Aid Impact also found a lack of accountability and criticized an "imbalance in favour of global, high-level initiatives, with less focus on the grassroots and operational levels".<sup>38</sup>

Around the world, feminists are also involved in the humanitarian sector and responses to emergencies, and there are initiatives to increase support for local organizations, including those led by women, including young feminists. But they remain underfunded and under-focused on. The overall status quo still clashes with increasing recognition of the challenges they face in crises, including abuse by aid workers, and a growing number of pledges to better support them, and pursue related 'feminist foreign policy' and 'localization' agenda (see the box below for examples).

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33 A. Naik, "[Tackling sexual exploitation and abuse by aid workers: what has changed 20 years on?](#)" Humanitarian Practice Network (2022).

34 "[Safeguarding Summit 2018](#)". UK government website.

35 "[DAC Recommendation on Ending Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance](#)". OECD DAC website.

36 R. Flummerfelt & N. Peyton, "[EXCLUSIVE: More than 50 women accuse aid workers of sex abuse in Congo Ebola crisis](#)". The New Humanitarian (2020).

37 "[Global Report on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment 2021](#)". Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2021).

38 "[The UK's approach to safeguarding in the humanitarian sector](#)". Independent Commission for Aid Impact (2023).

## Box: Examples of relevant donor commitments

**2013:** Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies, a multi-stakeholder initiative aimed at driving change and increasing the humanitarian system's accountability for its response to GBV in emergencies.<sup>39</sup>

**2014:** Sweden adopts the world's first Feminist Foreign Policy, a step that is followed by *Canada (2017), France (2019), Mexico (2020), Spain (2021), Luxembourg (2021), Germany (2021), Chile (2022) and Germany (2023)*<sup>40</sup>

**2016:** World Humanitarian Summit commitments to increase access to sexual and reproductive health; GBV prevention; gender-responsive humanitarian programming; and the percentage of funding going to local NGOs.<sup>41</sup>

**2018:** G7 Whistler Declaration on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls in Humanitarian Action.<sup>42</sup>

**2019:** UN Security Council resolution on ending sexual violence in conflict.<sup>43</sup>

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39 [Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies website](#).

40 ["Feminist foreign policies: An Introduction"](#). UN Women.

41 "While no explicit commitments to funding were made in the Grand Bargain agreed upon at the World Humanitarian Summit, a Friends of Gender Group comprised of Grand Bargain signatories has sought to mainstream gender equality and women's empowerment across Grand Bargain workstreams." ["Funding for gender-relevant humanitarian response"](#). Development Initiatives (2022).

42 ["The Whistler Declaration on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls in Humanitarian Action"](#). G7 Research Group (2018).

43 ["Landmark UN Security Council Resolution 2467 \(2019\) strengthens justice and accountability and calls for a survivor-centered approach in the prevention and response to conflict-related sexual violence, 29 April 2019"](#). UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (2019).

**2019:** G7 Gender Ministers Meeting in Paris pledged to make gender equality “a global cause”, prevent GBV in conflict and better meet survivors’ needs.<sup>44</sup>

**2019:** UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and partners convened the Oslo Conference, its first ever thematic humanitarian conference on GBV (at which 21 donors pledged over US\$363 million).<sup>45</sup>

**2020:** For the first time, UNOCHA provided \$25 million in rapid-response GBV funding for GBV prevention through the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), with a notable requirement that at least 30% of this assistance had to be channelled through women-led national and local NGOs.<sup>46</sup>

**2021:** Women, Peace & Security and Humanitarian Action Compact is agreed through the Generational Equality Forum; other resources are committed.<sup>47</sup>

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44 [“G7 ministers pledge to make gender equality ‘global cause’”](#). France 24 (2019).

45 [“Oslo Conference on Ending Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Humanitarian Crises: Co-Host Outcome Statement”](#). ReliefWeb (2019).

46 [“CERF releases \\$25M for women-led projects battling gender-based violence”](#). United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund (2020).

47 [“Women, Peace & Security and Humanitarian Action \(WPS-HA\) Compact”](#). Generation Equality.

# 03 / Following the Money

Aid donors spent about \$36.7 billion on humanitarian projects around the world in 2022, according to the OECD's latest data published at the end of 2023. The top funded sub-sector was 'material relief assistance and services' (\$19.4 billion).<sup>48</sup> The next largest were 'emergency food assistance' (\$7.4 billion); and 'relief coordination and support services' (\$6.9 billion). Much less was spent on 'reconstruction, relief and rehabilitation' (\$901 million) and 'disaster prevention and preparedness' (under \$2.2 billion).<sup>49</sup>

The top country recipients of this spending, overall, were: Syria (\$6.2 billion), Ukraine (\$2.9 billion), Afghanistan (\$2.1 billion) and Yemen (\$1.7 billion). The top donors, (again overall, and not necessarily to these recipients) were: the United States (\$11.5 billion), Turkey (\$5.1 billion), Germany (\$3.6 billion), and EU Institutions (\$3.2 billion).

These donors rarely spend money directly; rather, most of this funding is passed on to other organizations (which may then pass it on to others). The leading 'channel' for humanitarian aid

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48 This sub-sector is defined by the OECD as: "Shelter, water, sanitation, education, health services, including supply of medicines and malnutrition management, including medical nutrition management; supply of other nonfood relief items (including cash and voucher delivery modalities) for the benefit of crisis-affected people, including refugees and internally displaced people in developing countries. Includes assistance delivered by or coordinated by international civil protection units in the immediate aftermath of a disaster (in-kind assistance, deployment of specially-equipped teams, logistics and transportation, or assessment and coordination by experts sent to the field). Also includes measures to promote and protect the safety, well-being, dignity and integrity of crisis-affected people including refugees and internally displaced persons in developing countries". "[DAC and CRS code lists](#)". OECD website.

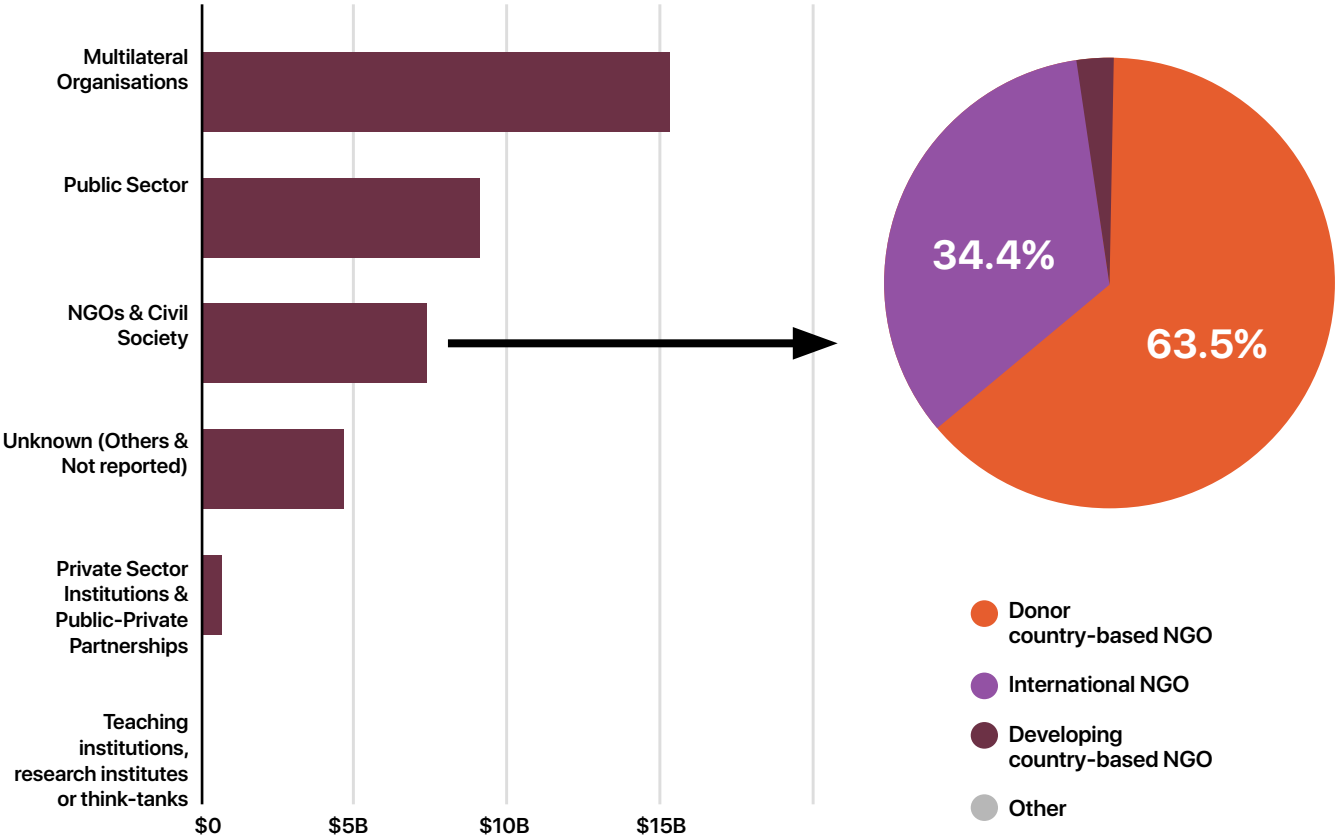
49 All figures in this section are based on the latest aid data uploaded 22 December 2023 to the [OECD DAC CRS database](#), looking at spending by all official donors in US\$ 2021 constant prices.



spending has been multilateral organizations (predominantly UN agencies), which received over 40% of the total in 2022. About 20% was categorized as going through ‘NGOs and civil society’ but, looking at the details of that data (total: under \$7.4 billion), only about 2% (just over \$150 million) is categorized as having been given directly to specifically ‘Developing country-based NGOs’. Actually, almost all of it (98%) went through ‘Donor country-based NGOs’ and international NGOs instead.<sup>50</sup> This reflects long-standing and long-criticized trends, in which the countries and communities in the Global South that are supposed to be the beneficiaries of aid receive this support in often indirect ways, sometimes with many steps in the chain before it reaches the ground.

50 Humanitarian Aid, Total via Channel: NGOs & Civil Society: \$7,359.955 million in 2022. Within this, Channel of Delivery Name: ‘Developing country-based NGO’: \$150.357 million in 2022. ‘Donor country-based NGO’: \$4,675.951 million; remainder is international NGOs.

**Chart: Extremely little funding has gone directly to local civil society**



## Challenges in following the money

Following the money spent on humanitarian responses is generally complicated by the fact that, as the research group Development Initiatives has described: “There is no universal obligation or system for reporting expenditure on international or domestic humanitarian assistance.”<sup>51</sup> Several sources can help, however. Wealthy country governments that are part of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC) are required to report their aid spending to it each year, including what they dedicated to humanitarian projects. A growing number of other donors, including dozens of private philanthropic foundations, report to it voluntarily. This section of the report focuses on this dataset, which was last updated on 22 December, 2023 (with data up to the end of 2022).

There are added challenges in following money to young women and girls. The datasets that do exist don’t have specific categories or columns to capture support to these or other marginalized groups. The spending records that donors publish rarely include detailed demographic information.<sup>52</sup> While there are some relevant sector/purpose codes (such as ‘Ending violence against women and girls’ and ‘Women’s rights organizations and movements, and government institutions’) these are not consistently used by donors. Gender ‘policy markers’ are attached to some records, however they aren’t consistently tagged either. As with most international aid flows, it is typically hard to see beyond the first set of recipients and who they might pass any spending on to. Noting these significant limitations, this report combines analysis of spending under relevant sector categories, or tagged with a gender ‘policy marker’, and text-based searches of raw project records for “girls”, “young women”, “gender” or “feminist”.

UNOCHA’s Financial Tracking Service also tracks and publishes details of spending under UN appeals, as well as some spending outside of them. Additionally, many aid donors, but also a growing

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51 [“Defining humanitarian assistance”](#). Global Humanitarian Assistance website.

52 This was observed by the report’s authors across OECD, IATI, UNOCHA FTS data. Development Initiatives’ 2023 Global Humanitarian Assistance Report also noted that only a third of UN appeals in 2022 included age and gender disaggregated data on the people in need of assistance.

number of intermediaries, 'implementing agencies' and other actors, also publish spending data to the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI)'s open aid data standard. These two sources can have more up-to-date data than the OECD, at least for some donors, and are used in the Case Studies section of this report for additional detail on spending on Afghanistan, Sudan and Ukraine.

Overall, this report focuses primarily on the formal humanitarian sector and funding provided by official aid donors (public money from donor governments). However, it also looks at some other funders that are filling gaps left by these donors, and/or operating outside of their coordinating mechanisms (see section: Other Actors in Crises).

Looking at the OECD's project-level micro-data for 2022 humanitarian assistance spending, less than 2% of total humanitarian assistance in 2022 went to projects tagged in the OECD's database as having gender equality as their 'principal' objective.<sup>53</sup> Just over 18% of the total went to projects categorized as having gender equality as a 'significant' objective; 55% went to projects categorized as 'not targeted' at gender equality; and the remaining over 24% went to projects that had no data in this column.<sup>54</sup>

The EU was the largest spender of humanitarian assistance on projects with gender equality as their primary objective, followed by the Netherlands, the UK and the UN's Central Emergency Response Fund. The US, the world's largest aid donor, tagged almost none of their spending like this (just over \$1.3 million).

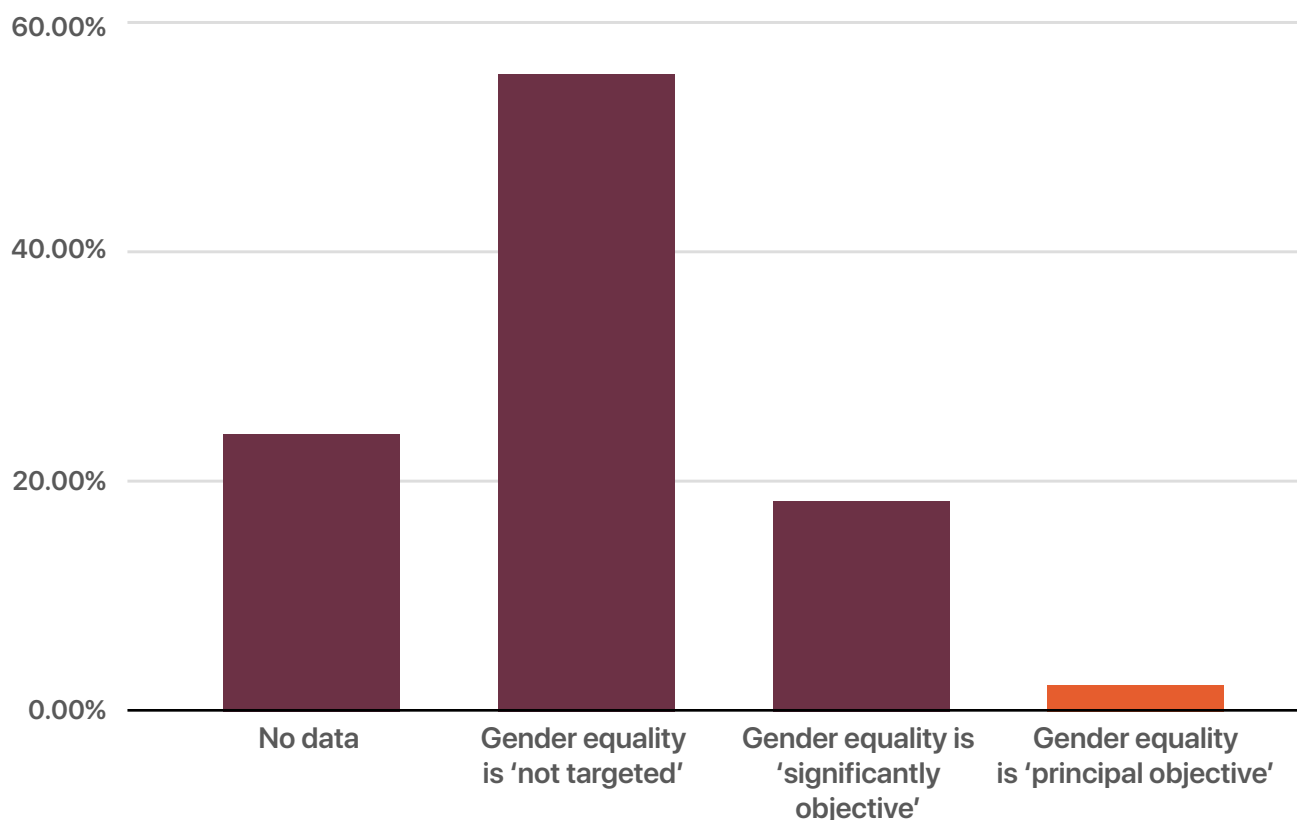
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53 ["DAC gender equality policy marker"](#). OECD website.

54 Total humanitarian assistance in 2022: \$36,743.873 million. Gender policy marker 2 (principal objective): \$677.797 million, Gender policy marker 1 (significant objective): \$6,747.609 million, Gender policy marker 0 (not targeted): \$20,342.665 million, No data: \$8,975.802 million. (US\$ constant 2021 prices).



## Humanitarian assistance in 2022 targeting gender equality (OECD data)



Girls are not even mentioned in most records of humanitarian spending; of the more than 24,000 underlying records (rows of data) in the OECD's dataset for humanitarian assistance in 2022, only 85 mention 'girls' in their titles. ('Young women' even less: in just 2 of these records' titles). In many of these cases, they do not appear to be the focus of projects and are mentioned in conjunction with other groups, for instance: "girls and boys"; "women and girls"; "girls, boys, women and men"; "girls, boys and their caregivers"; and "refugees, mainly women, boys and girls." Exceptions where girls and/or young women do appear to be a focus of projects include:

- The Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, through the UN Populations Fund (UNFPA), spent \$1.8 million in humanitarian assistance on a project in Somalia to support the “wellbeing of women and girls”, and in particular integrate gender-based violence interventions with sexual and reproductive health services. Its project record said it also included “young people” as a key “result area”.<sup>55</sup>
- The Korea International Cooperation Agency, via an unspecified donor-country NGO, spent \$306,000 categorized as humanitarian assistance on a project aimed at “Empowering resilient Syrian refugee and vulnerable Egyptian host communities youth, especially girls and young women, to reduce gender inequalities [and] gender-based violence...” Comprehensive sexual education as well as work on child, early and forced marriage, are mentioned in the record.<sup>56</sup>
- The US State Department, via an unspecified Public-Private Partnership, spent over \$900,000 on a project in Lebanon with the description: “Adolescent girls and young women at risk and/or affected by child and early marriage due to the humanitarian crisis in Lebanon are better protected through having access to Child Protection and Gender-Based Violence response and prevention services.”<sup>57</sup>
- The US State Department, via an unspecified donor country-based NGO, also spent over \$900,000 on a project in Kenya with the description: “Protect, educate and empower unaccompanied and separated vulnerable refugee girls and young women in Nairobi”.<sup>58</sup>

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55 OECD ID: 2016160067.

56 OECD ID: 2021019457.

57 OECD IDs: 2022019734, 2022019735 and 2022019736.

58 OECD IDs: 2022018667, 2022018668 and 2022018669.

- Germany’s Foreign Office spent \$1 million (also via an unspecified donor country-based NGO) on a project with the description: “Children, adolescents and young people (CAY), especially girls and young women, affected by crisis in Ethiopia and South Sudan, are empowered and supported through gender sensitive protection and SRHR programs to realize their rights safely with dignity.”<sup>59</sup>
- UNICEF funded humanitarian projects specifically mentioning “adolescent girls” in their titles in both India (Project title: “Nutrition Services for Adolescent Girls and Women”) and Ghana (“Inclusion and Adolescent Girls Education”). There is no further detail in these records’ description sections, however.<sup>60</sup>

Beyond humanitarian assistance, donors spend aid on other things in countries in crisis. There is a specific sector code, for instance, for ‘Women’s rights organizations and movements, and government institutions’. However, donors have spent very little under it. In 2022, they spent more than ten times more on their own administrative costs (\$11.2 billion) than on these groups (\$964 million).<sup>61</sup> These groups received just 0.34% of total global aid flows in 2022 (down from 0.42% in 2020)<sup>62</sup>; in many countries in crisis, they received even less. In Ukraine, which received a historic \$29.4 billion in total aid in 2022, they only got about 0.05% of this (less than \$14.6 million).<sup>63</sup>

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59 OECD ID: 2022008962.

60 OECD IDs: 2022003324 and 2022005053.

61 \$11,230.5 million in 2022 on Sector 910: ‘Administrative Costs of Donors, Total’ versus \$964.132 million on Sector 15170: ‘Women’s rights organizations and movements, and government institutions’.

62 Total aid in 2022: \$287,126.968 million versus that spent on these groups; \$964.132 million. Total aid in 2020: \$237,050.208 million versus that spent on these groups; \$988.319 million.

63 Total aid to Ukraine in 2022: \$29,401.790 million versus the amount (\$14.595 million) coded to Sector 15170: ‘Women’s rights organizations and movements, and government institutions’.

## Table: Summary of findings from the latest OECD data

Questions	Findings
How much was spent in total on humanitarian aid? (latest year available)	<b>\$36.7 billion</b> (2022)
Included 'policy marker' for gender equality as a primary objective?	<b>\$678 million</b> (1.8% of total)
Included 'policy marker' for gender equality as a secondary objective?	<b>\$6.7 billion</b> (18% of total)
Included 'policy marker' for gender equality being 'not targeted'	<b>\$20.3 billion</b> (55% of total)
How many project records mentioned 'girls' in their titles? (and how much funding did they receive?)	<b>85</b> (about \$50 million; 0.14% of total)
How many project records mentioned 'young women' in their titles? (and how much funding did they receive?)	<b>Only 2</b> (about \$350,000; <0.001% of total)
How many project records mentioned 'gender' in their 'description' sections? (and how much funding did they receive?)	<b>1,958</b> (about \$714 million; 1.9% of total)
How many project records mentioned 'feminist' in their 'description' sections? (and how much funding did they receive?)	<b>253</b> (about \$1.25 million; 0.003% of total)

# 04 / Case studies



	Percentage of UN appeals funded (2023 UN data)	Project records mentioning 'girls' and 'young women' (2023 IATI data)	% of total aid to women's rights organizations (2022 OECD data)
<b>Afghanistan</b>	46%	Almost 50% and 0%	0.6%
<b>Sudan</b>	43%	About 25% and 0%	Less than 0.6%
<b>Ukraine</b>	69% of requested funds raised	Less than 5% and 0%	0.05%

## Afghanistan

Following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, the country has been faced with what the European Commission has called an "unprecedented humanitarian crisis". In 2023, 28 million people – or two-thirds of the population – were estimated to require urgent humanitarian assistance.<sup>64</sup> The UN's 2023 Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan called for \$3.23 billion, of which just 46% (\$1.48 billion) ended up funded.<sup>65</sup> It was the first year that a UN Afghanistan appeal was so underfunded; in comparison, that call in 2022 received 76% of the funding requested and that call in 2021 received 97%.<sup>66</sup>

64 "2 years after the Taliban takeover: Afghanistan's population need urgent humanitarian assistance". European Commission (2023).

65 The biggest contributors were the US (\$336 million), the Asian Development Bank (\$200 million) and the European Commission (\$162 million). UNOCHA's Financial Tracking Service also collected reports of \$219 million outside of its plan. UN [Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan 2023](#). Accessed: 1 March 2024.

66 'Trends in coordinated plan requirements,' [Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan 2023](#).

International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) data for Afghanistan in 2023 covers almost \$3.4 billion in humanitarian spending across more than 1,100 records (reflecting spending outside of the UN's plan as well as that under it). "Girls" are mentioned in the project descriptions of over 540 of these (almost half) but, as we found in the OECD data analysis above, they are often mentioned in passing and in conjunction with other groups such as "boys and girls" and "girls and boys". "Young women" meanwhile are not mentioned in any of these project descriptions.<sup>67</sup>

This doesn't reflect the active role that girls and young women played in social, political and economic movements particularly in the 2009-2019 period, says Heleena Kakar,<sup>68</sup> a young feminist activist from Afghanistan. At the age of twenty, Heleena and other young Afghan girls created RUIDAD, the country's first feminist magazine to deepen political consciousness about gender. They were active in the non-governmental sector which she said had burgeoned, with many Afghan women starting initiatives across a range of sectors. The majority of these were staffed by mostly young women and benefited other members of their communities. In her words: "Over the course of the ten years [preceding the Taliban takeover], lots of NGOs were registered. 80-90% of these registered NGOs were led by young women. They were also involved in technology and sports. Young women brought more innovation to the movement."

When the Taliban returned to power, this reversed the progress that girls and women in Afghanistan had been making. Now, Kakar said: "Afghanistan is the only country on the globe where women and girls lack basic rights including the right to freedom, education, and even the right to medical services." Some experts and scholars have described the situation as Gender Apartheid, with such basic freedoms being denied to women and girls also including access to public spaces and the ability to move freely without a male companion.<sup>69</sup> In 2023, MADRE, together with the Institute for Gender, Law, and Transformative Peace at CUNY School of Law, published in-depth research and legal analysis, including on how Taliban policies, acts and crimes can amount to 'gender persecution' which is recognized as a crime against humanity in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. So far,

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67 IATI data extracted from "[Country Development Finance Data](#)".

68 Heleena Kakar was interviewed by the authors of this report on 23rd January 2024.

69 "[The International Obligation to Counter Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan](#)". Columbia Human Rights Law review, Issue 54.1.

though, perpetrators have enjoyed impunity.<sup>70</sup>

In the current context, women have also been banned from working for the UN and NGOs. Now, Human Rights Watch said: “aid groups must navigate trying to deliver crucial assistance while ensuring they do not reinforce the Taliban’s abusive diktats”.<sup>71</sup>

## “We need to know that the humanitarian sector is standing with us.”

*Heleena Kakar,<sup>72</sup> a young feminist activist from Afghanistan.*

In another interview for this report, Negina Yari, a feminist activist and Chair of the Women Advisory Group to the Humanitarian Country Team in Afghanistan, warned that international humanitarian actors working in the country appear to “...be leaving the principle of gender equality behind”. She described many as having adopted what they call a ‘practical approach’ to navigating the current context and the Taliban’s rule, which results in the exclusion of women and girls from their programmes. Complying with the edict that women can no longer work in the aid sector, she explained, means that less aid may reach women and girls, and even less may reach those with disabilities who may be housebound.

Yari has also been the Executive Director of a feminist organization in Afghanistan (not named for their safety) for over 11 years, whose activities include running two health clinics providing free services for girls and women, and a World Food Programme project delivering food assistance to 25,000 people.

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70 [“Ensuring global accountability for gender persecution.”](#) Madre website.

71 P. Gossman, [“Hard Choices in Afghanistan’s Humanitarian Crisis”](#). Human Rights Watch (2023).

72 Heleena Kakar was interviewed by the authors of this report on 23rd January 2024.

Hers is thus an example of a woman-led organization that is still active in the internationally-funded humanitarian response. Yari highlights that for many actors in the humanitarian sector, a 'practical approach' overlooks how "if the Taliban are becoming stricter and stricter, women are becoming smarter and smarter", and are finding ways to navigate the new restrictions they now face under the current regime. Referencing donors' commitments to increasingly 'localize' aid in general, she added: "localization should be equalization with women-led organizations".

Many organizations in Afghanistan led by women, including young women, are struggling to access the support they need, she said, and some have had to close down due to lack of funding. A high number of women with professional skills have left the country in recent years. Even the remaining organizations and individuals that have the interest and ability to be involved in humanitarian relief efforts often struggle to access resources. While she gave examples of UN Women and UNDP starting to provide information in local languages, she said there are too often requirements to apply for funding in English only.

According to Hareer Hashim, another Afghan feminist activist and a crisis consultant, some feminist funds such as the Global Fund for Women and MADRE are doing more than the traditional humanitarian actors to ensure that resources reach local women's rights organizations. They have mapped feminist and women-led organizations in the country and are providing them with funding so that they can sustain their work in spite of the repressive environment in which they operate. Hareer says this is "to ensure that Afghan women still have the freedom to work and sustain their organizations".

Heleena Kakar thinks more such initiatives are needed, and that the needs of Afghan women could be met by multiple actors, working to meet a variety of requirements. For instance, Afghan women could be offered remote jobs, stakeholders could amplify their voices and channel resources to young women and girls who are fighting for their basic survival. She also points out that currently women and girls are the ones who are resisting the Taliban, and fighting for their rights. "We need to know that the humanitarian sector is standing with us, not just financially, but also in terms of our security."



## Sudan

When armed conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) began on 15 April 2023, it heightened a humanitarian crisis that already involved millions of people displaced and experiencing severe food insecurity.<sup>73</sup> Infrastructure, including healthcare facilities, has been destroyed, and 25 million people – more than half of the population – were estimated to need aid and protection.<sup>74</sup> Despite high needs, some aid agencies temporarily halted or scaled back their operations in the country. The World Food Program, for instance, suspended its operations for two weeks after three of its employees were killed.<sup>75</sup>

The UN's coordinated 2023 Sudan Humanitarian Response Plan had asked for \$2.57 billion, of which only \$1.1 billion (43%) ended up funded.<sup>76</sup> Unlike Afghanistan, previous UN appeals for Sudan also had high unmet needs: in 2022, 58% of plan requirements were funded; in 2021 that number was significantly lower (38%). For Sudan some sectors, or 'clusters', were also strikingly underfunded, such as education (receiving just 12% of needed funding) and refugee response (receiving just 20%).<sup>77</sup>

International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) data for Sudan in 2023 covers \$1.5 billion in humanitarian spending across more than 2,000 records. "Girls" are mentioned in the project descriptions of over 500 of these (about a quarter) but, as we also found above, they are often mentioned in passing and in conjunction with other groups such as "boys and girls". "Young women," meanwhile, are not mentioned in any of these project descriptions, even in conjunction with other groups.<sup>78</sup>

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73 M. Ferragamo & D. Roy, "[What Is the Extent of Sudan's Humanitarian Crisis?](#)". Council on Foreign Relations (2024).

74 "[UN urges \\$3 bn aid for Sudan and refugees](#)". France 24 (2023).

75 S. Wilkin, "[Food relief agency resumes Sudan operations after staff deaths forced halt](#)". Politico (2023).

76 The biggest contributors were the US (49%), European Commission (11%), the UN's Central Emergency Response Fund (5%) and Saudi Arabia (3%). UNOCHA's Financial Tracking Service also collected reports of \$155 million outside of its plan. [Sudan Humanitarian Response Plan 2023](#). Accessed 1 March 2024.

77 'Trends in coordinated plan requirements' and 'Funding progress by cluster/sector', [Sudan Humanitarian Response Plan 2023](#).

78 IATI data extracted from "[Country Development Finance Data](#)".

Most of the internally-displaced people and refugees who have fled the conflict to neighbouring areas and countries are women and children, who are more vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence.<sup>79</sup> According to the Initiative for Strategic Litigation in Africa (ISLA), the RSF has also “continued to commit crimes against female civilians, including massive campaigns of sexual violence against women and girls,” including in Khartoum and Darfur.<sup>80</sup> The group is also believed to be abducting young women, and girls, holding them for ransom, and, in some cases, selling them in markets.<sup>81</sup>

In an interview for this report, Reem Abbas, a young Sudanese feminist activist and researcher, described how young women have been sidelined from decision-making while being disproportionately affected by the conflicts following the fall of President Omar al-Bashir in 2019. Young women had been visibly at the forefront of the protests that led to his fall and had “led the revolution,” she said, but have since been “sidelined and are now being punished by the male-dominated political marketplace.” She argued: “Sudanese women need safety and protection... They also need to be represented in the institutions that are well resourced and have more decision-making power.”

**“Sudanese women need safety and protection...  
They also need to be represented in the institutions that are  
well resourced and have more decision-making power.”**

*- Reem Abbas, a young Sudanese feminist activist and researcher*

In another interview for this report, Doha Ali, a young Sudanese feminist activist said: “Unfortunately, the critical role played by grassroots organizations, including young feminists, women and gender non-conforming people, in responding to the humanitarian crisis in Sudan remains largely undocumented

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79 M. Ferragamo & D. Roy, “What Is the Extent of Sudan’s Humanitarian Crisis?”. Council on Foreign Relations (2024).

80 “Kidnapping and Slavery: The RSF is committing more dangerous rights violations in this malign war against civilians in Sudan”. Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (2023).

81 “Kidnapping and Slavery: The RSF is committing more dangerous rights violations in this malign war against civilians in Sudan”. Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (2023).

and untraceable. These initiatives often operate under the radar, relying on personal networks and community connections to carry out their essential work.” Largely away from the attention and funding of the international community, young Sudanese women have been playing an active role in responding to crisis and humanitarian needs in their country, including by spearheading the establishment of community-led ‘Humanitarian Emergency Rooms’, which operate at local levels and provide medical, psychosocial and other essential services for survivors of gender-based violence. Ali also described how young Sudanese girls have been leading advocacy efforts to raise awareness about the crisis in Sudan, including by utilizing online social media platforms to engage with global audiences, sharing personal stories and challenges faced by their communities. Sudanese groups in the diaspora have also played a key role in expatriating some members of the LGBTQI community in Sudan, recognizing the particular additional vulnerabilities that they face.

## Ukraine

When Russia invaded Ukraine in late February 2022, it escalated a conflict that began in 2014. Thus, there were already humanitarian mechanisms in place, including the Ukraine Humanitarian Fund for donors to pool contributions, overseen by UNOCHA to facilitate timely and coordinated aid aligned to Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs) and Flash Appeals, supported by inter-agency/ cluster coordination mechanisms.<sup>82</sup>

After the invasion, Ukraine became the recipient of the largest amount of humanitarian aid ever recorded in one year.<sup>83</sup> An initial UN Flash Appeal calling for \$1.1 billion for March–May 2022<sup>84</sup> was replaced with a larger \$4.29 billion until that December (which ended up receiving about 87%, or over \$3.7 billion).<sup>85</sup> By the end of 2023, donors had contributed \$2.72 billion to that year’s coordinated Ukraine Humanitarian Response Plan 2023, out of its requested \$3.95 billion. This means 69% of its

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82 [“About the Ukraine Humanitarian Fund”](#). OCHA website.

83 Angus Urquhart, Erica Mason, Fran Girling-Morris, Suzanna Nelson-Pollard. [Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2023. Development Initiatives \(2023\)](#).

84 OCHA, [“Ukraine Flash Appeal \(March - May 2022\) \[EN/UK/RU\]”](#). ReliefWeb (2022).

85 [“Ukraine Flash Appeal 2022”](#). Financial Tracking Service (2022).

funding needs were met (a much higher share of requested aid than our other case studies).<sup>86</sup>

International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) data for Ukraine in 2023 covers more than \$3 billion in humanitarian spending across almost 1,000 records. “Girls” are mentioned in the project descriptions of just 37 of these (less than 5%) and, as we found above, they are often mentioned in passing and along with other groups such as “boys and girls”. Again, “young women” are not mentioned at all, in any of these records.<sup>87</sup>

The Feminist Workshop – a collective of young feminist, gender non-conforming (GNC) and queer activists in Lviv, Ukraine – is an example of a local group that is involved in humanitarian relief but has struggled to access international funding for this work. Its members are mainly between the ages of 16 to 25 years old. They began meeting in 2016 to build feminist community and organize events, including one modelled on ‘Take back the night’, to reclaim safer streets for women and gender non-conforming people. It attracted local anti-rights actors, allegedly supported by Russian oligarchs, who stood alongside the route, screaming and throwing eggs at them.

When the latest Russian invasion began in February 2022, the Feminist Workshop started to provide humanitarian services too. Lviv is close to the border with Poland, and so many displaced and fleeing people went through the city. In response, this group opened a shelter for displaced women and children and organized activities, including educational opportunities for the children. In January 2023, it opened a second shelter to respond to high needs for housing – but less than eight months later, in July, it had to close down due to a lack of sufficient funding.

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86 The largest contributor was the US (37%) followed by Germany (13%), the European Commission (12%), and Japan (6%). UNOCHA’s Financial Tracking Service also collected reports of another \$530 million spent outside of this plan “[Ukraine Humanitarian Response Plan 2023](#)”. Accessed 1 March 2024.

87 IATI data extracted from “[Country Development Finance Data](#)”.

## **“I do not want to compete [for funding] with an organization in Afghanistan for instance”**

*- Yosh, one of the co-founders of the Feminist Workshop in Ukraine*

“I do not want to compete [for funding] with an organization in Afghanistan, for instance. I want every organization to get its money,” said Yosh, one of the co-founders of the group, in an interview for this report. They explained how the group had tried to apply for humanitarian funds from the EU but found these resources to be inaccessible without the professional experience and education that is often required to navigate these complicated processes and their forms. Although the Feminist Workshop had been unsuccessful in securing funding from traditional humanitarian actors, they eventually succeeded in finding support from several global feminist funders over a number of years, including additional resources for its humanitarian work following the invasion.

# 05/ Other Actors in Crises

Alongside, and sometimes connected to the formal international humanitarian sector, are other actors in crises such as women's and feminist funds – as well as organizations that actively oppose sexual and reproductive rights – which this section turns to.

## Women's and Feminist Funds

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, almost all international women's funds have stepped in to rapidly fund responses to emergencies led by women, including young women. As mentioned above, examples include the emergence in 2020 of the Global Resilience Fund (GRF) – a new, feminist pooled fund explicitly “working with and for girls and young feminists responding to crises”. Since then, it has moved more than \$2 million to these crisis response efforts, primarily from donations by private philanthropic foundations.<sup>88</sup>

Women's funds are nonprofit grantmaking organizations that exclusively support organizations and movements led by women, often including young women and girls.<sup>89</sup> They are typically set up to be able to provide small, flexible grants including to grassroots groups that aren't formally registered.

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88 [“Feminist humanitarian response with and for girls and young feminists”](#) Global Resilience Fund.

89 [“Building Financial Sustainability for Women's Rights: The Role of Women's Funds”](#). OECD (2007).



They accept applications in local languages and strive for minimal bureaucracy. “The cornerstone of our work is to follow the leadership of local feminist activists and communities to understand the needs and respond with flexible funding – both immediate and long-term – directly to them,” explained the Global Fund for Women in 2021<sup>90</sup>. It described then how a group of 14 feminist funds from around the world, now called Feminist Alchemy, had come together to share knowledge and best practices on crisis response and “to leverage [this]... to influence and transform the global humanitarian sector.”<sup>91</sup>

In a separate Call to Action, focused on the crisis in Afghanistan, Prospera, the international network of women’s funds, called for a coordinated response from funders that “takes the lead from local activists and amplifies their voices” while prioritizing their security.<sup>92</sup> It described how feminist funds such as the Urgent Action Funds have “a track record and vast experience in reaching those in situations of marginalization and oppression [and] are leading efforts and informing feminist funding strategies during emergencies.” Other members of the Prospera network include Mama Cash (the world’s first international women’s fund, founded in 1983) and the Equality Fund (which was founded in 2019 with a \$300 million grant from the Canadian government, “the largest single investment ever made by a government in global feminist movements”).<sup>93</sup>

Sudan is a current crisis in which women’s funds have been involved in moving money to local organizations. Urgent Action Fund - Africa, for instance, made rapid response grants to both support emergency activities and the movements that are needed for transformative and lasting change. These grants supported, as examples: “movement strategy spaces, safety, relocation, medical

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90 Global Fund for Women has awarded over 12 million in crisis grants since 2014.

91 “[Call For Action: Invest In A Feminist, Collective Approach To Build A World Beyond Crisis](#)”. Global Fund For Women (2021).

92 “[Call to Action on Funding Activism in Afghanistan and other Humanitarian Crises](#)” Prospera.

93 “[Who We Are](#)”. The Equality Fund website.

services, documentation, strategic communication, stakeholder engagement, awareness raising, and psycho-social support while simultaneously engaging with local movements for lasting change.”<sup>94</sup>

Women’s funds exist on international, regional and national levels. Their own funders include private philanthropic foundations as well as bilateral government agencies. Their role in getting funding to local organizations has also been recognized, including by the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee and its Network on Gender Equality. In a 2008 briefing, it said that aid donors struggle to support small and grassroots organizations directly and that “one effective solution... is to use women’s funds” as intermediaries to distribute funding, as they “are experienced in administering small grants and can reach local organizations.”<sup>95</sup> In 2016, another OECD report described “supporting women’s funds [as] one of the most effective ways for donors to get resources to southern women’s rights organizations and movements.” It also noted that some women’s funds “also play a critical role in providing rapid response or emergency funds in crisis situations where time is of the essence.” Despite this, it said, only “a handful of donors” were working with such funds and, in general, they seemed to have “limited awareness” of them and were thus “underutilizing their potential.”<sup>96</sup>

## Anti-Rights Actors

Actors in humanitarian crises also include groups that actively oppose sexual and reproductive rights that are essential to gender-just responses. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA), for instance, has a Rapid Response Team which goes to crises areas/sites to provide “emotional and spiritual care”.<sup>97</sup> Its sister organization, Samaritan’s Purse, was in the news during the COVID pandemic for requiring health workers to agree to an anti-LGBTQI ‘statement of faith’ that says that

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94 H. Abbas, “[The Black feminists that broke philanthropy’s inaction in Sudan](#)”. Alliance (2023).

95 DAC Network on Gender Equality, “[Gender Equality, Women’s Empowerment and the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness: \(Issues Brief 3 \) Innovative Funding for Women’s Organisations](#)”. OECD (2008).

96 “[Donor support to southern women’s rights organizations](#)”. OECD (2016).

97 “[The Billy Graham Rapid Response Team trains and deploys followers of Jesus Christ to minister to the emotional and spiritual needs of people in crisis](#)”. Billy Graham Rapid Response Team.



marriage is “exclusively the union of one genetic male and one genetic female.”<sup>98</sup> Both groups share some administrative services and staff, including their CEO: Franklin Graham, a leading opponent of abortion and LGBTQI rights in the US.<sup>99</sup> He once said Satan is the architect of same-sex marriage and called Islam “evil and very wicked”.<sup>100</sup>

In the US, Samaritan’s Purse has also been involved in funding anti-abortion “crisis pregnancy centres”;<sup>101</sup> it has additionally been named on many amicus curiae briefs to the Supreme Court, including ones in favour of a ban on trans girls and young women participating in school sports<sup>102</sup> and in support of the Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization case which overruled Roe v. Wade.<sup>103</sup> Its international activities, meanwhile, received more than \$52 million under US federal awards in 2021, including from the USAID agency, for “emergency food security” and “emergency response and economic recovery” programmes in DRC and Sudan.<sup>104</sup> It has also reportedly worked with the World Food Program, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and the International Organization for Migration.<sup>105</sup>

In 2022-2023, the authors of this report also revealed how millions of dollars in aid had gone to anti-LGBTQI groups in Africa that have been pushing new anti-homosexuality legislation. Some of this funding was provided for humanitarian projects. In 2022, the Christian Council of Ghana (CCG) received US aid for a humanitarian project in the country entitled “Addressing Shelter needs of

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98 C. Quinlan, “[Evangelical field hospital requires health workers to take anti-gay pledge](#)”. American Journal News (2020).

99 The two groups are also financially linked; In 2022, BGAE paid \$12.5 million to Samaritan’s Purse, and received \$2.4 million from it. [Billy Graham Evangelistic Association And Consolidated Organizations: Consolidated Financial Statements](#). (2023).

100 H. Sherwood, “[US evangelical preacher should be banned from entering UK, critics say](#)”. The Guardian (2017).

101 Z. Hill, “[Over 100 Turn Out for Protest of SB 20, Hope Pregnancy Center](#)”. High Country Press (2023).

102 [Jackson v West Virginia Board of Education](#). United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit (2023).

103 [Dobbs v Jackson Women’s Health Organization](#). Supreme Court of the United States.

104 “[Samaritans Purse: Audit for period ending December 2021](#)”. ProRepublica (2021).

105 Y. Shimron & B. Smietana, “[Under Franklin Graham, Samaritan’s Purse Grows to a \\$1 Billion Powerhouse](#)”. Christianity Today (2022).

refugees at Krisan Camp”<sup>106</sup>

That same year, it issued a communique asserting: “As we indicated in times past, our cultural norms and religious values as a nation do not support LGBTQ rights.”<sup>107</sup> In Uganda, two IKEA Foundation-funded humanitarian projects of Oxfam Novib in the Netherlands listed the anti-LGBTQI Pentecostal Assemblies of God as its “implementing” partner, including on a WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) and shelter project supporting refugees from South Sudan.<sup>108</sup>

There are many unanswered questions about BGAE and Samaritan’s Purse’s finances, including where much of their money comes from, and about their activities, including how their anti-rights positions may affect service delivery and recipients. More follow-up and research are also needed on funding flows and connections between aid donors and other anti-gender actors. How have they benefited from humanitarian aid and how do they use their work in crises to build up their revenues, capacity, connections, reputations and access to power and influence? To investigate and seek to answer such questions, follow-the-money analyses need to be complemented with on-the-ground reporting to understand how money was spent and with what effects. Cross-border, as well as cross-disciplinary teams, are required to pursue further work in this area.

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106 C. Provost & N. D. Sekyiamah, [“Exclusive: Millions in Western aid flowed to churches in Ghana despite years of campaigning against LGBTQI+ rights”](#). CNN.

107 [“Communique issued by the Christian Council of Ghana \(CCG\) on Friday January 24, 2020”](#). Christian Council of Ghana (2020).

108 In response to questions about this funding, the Ikea Foundation said at the time: “As our funding cannot be used to promote or advance any religious beliefs, we have approached Oxfam to understand more about the nature of this collaboration.”

# 06 / Conclusions



It is essential, including in times of emergencies, to maintain a sharp focus on the most marginalized communities, including girls, young women and young gender non-conforming people who may be even more vulnerable in crises. Beyond their vulnerabilities, however, it is also important to recognize the leadership and resilience of these groups, and to center them in the humanitarian ecosystem.

As Sarah Njeri and Megan Daigle argued in a 2022 paper, “it is important to recognize that localization alone is not enough to ensure inclusion of the most marginalized or the organizations that represent them.” Deliberate action is needed to ensure that these communities and organizations are not excluded from aid efforts – and that the humanitarian sector can live up to its promises to better support them.<sup>109</sup>

If the humanitarian sector is serious about gender equality, it needs to go beyond rhetoric to action. This requires shifting power from the institutions and states that currently dominate the sector, and centering the needs of communities in crises, including those of young women and girls, and young feminists. Globally, there are feminist organizations and feminist funds that are experienced and well-positioned to help make this happen. They provide some hope in an otherwise grim picture.

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<sup>109</sup> S. Njeri & M. Daigle, “[Women leading local humanitarian response during the Covid-19 pandemic](#)”. Humanitarian Policy Group (2022).

## Recommendations

We live in a world experiencing multiple, interconnected crises compounded by structural inequalities, including those based on racism, misogyny, and ableism. These inequalities can heighten vulnerabilities faced by groups, including young women and girls, in crisis contexts. Yet, moments of crisis can also be opportunities for positive change – including for traditional gender roles to shift, and for young women and girls to take up more public space. Funding young women and girls, and young feminists, can also be a concrete way to enable them more fully step into the leadership opportunities that may arise in these times. Responding to a world in crisis requires collaboration and coordination between multiple agencies, networks and organizations. To move forward

### Humanitarian aid donors should<sup>110</sup> :

- Significantly and demonstrably increase their support for young women and girls, and young feminists, in crises (including as decision-makers wherever possible)
- Significantly and demonstrably increase their spending via local organizations in crises, including women’s rights organizations and movements
- Ensure that they and their partners have sufficient gender-specific expertise and capacity, including looking at their own internal staffing and procedures too
- Support and fund the creation of credible, independent accountability mechanisms that raise awareness of rights in crises and can act on complaints
- Increase transparency on how their money is spent and support better age- and gender-disaggregated data collection at the project level
- Consistently use gender ‘policy markers’ to categorize their spending based on the extent to which gender equality is targeted and a significant objective - and explain how and why this is the case in the description sections of project records

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<sup>110</sup> Bilateral and multilateral donors; these recommendations can also apply and be taken up for meaningful change by international NGOs that roll out humanitarian support and sub-grant resources.

- Use their leverage to lift up the perspectives and leadership of girls and young women, and young feminists, on what they need and are facing in crises
- Ensure that none of their money is directly, indirectly or inadvertently supporting actors that oppose and threaten sexual and reproductive rights
- Work with feminist funds who are experienced in flexible grant-making in crises to local organizations led by women, including young women, and young feminists

#### **Feminist and women's funds should:**

- Mobilize more resources for local and national feminist and queer organizations who wish to engage in humanitarian work during times of crises
- Specifically support more girl and young feminist-centered work in crises, and the ability of these groups to access the humanitarian system's spaces and funding
- Make more visible this work and funding done in contexts of crises by publishing detailed data to the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI)
- Become more actively engaged in international humanitarian groups and networks, as well as those at the country-level in specific crises

#### **Media and other civil society should:**

- Follow the money to monitor aid donors' commitments and whether they're translated into meaningful action and change on the ground as they should
- Amplify the perspectives of people affected by crises, particularly those from the most marginalized communities – in humane ways that preserve their dignity



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