

ACTION LEARNING BRIEF AND CHECKLIST

PARTNERING WITH WOMEN- AND GIRL-LED ORGANIZATIONS



How do partnerships with women- and girl-led organizations advance UNICEF's Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action?

- **Supporting gender-based violence (GBV) risk mitigation:** Women- and girl-led organizations (WGOs) are often the first to respond to GBV risks in their communities. As made clear throughout a number of Inter-Agency Standing Committee sponsored guidelines, partnering with WGOs is key for (a) identifying and raising awareness around GBV risks; (b) developing contextually-appropriate risk mitigation strategies; (c) strengthening GBV coordination systems; (d) strengthening WGOs' role as agents of change at the community-level; and (e) investing in localized, sustainable movements to address GBV in the long-term.
- **Strengthening accountability with crisis-affected women and girls:** Accountability to affected populations requires engaging organizations representing adolescent girls, women's rights and youth in program design, delivery, monitoring and evaluation to ensure that humanitarian investments respond to crisis-affected women and girls' needs, concerns and priorities. Furthermore, when WGOs demonstrate strong ties to and trust within marginalized communities, they can also help identify the hardest to reach women and girls, and thus advance humanitarian agencies' accountability to these often overlooked groups as well.
- **Contributing to more actionable gender analyses:** Context-specific gender analysis is a requisite for the effective design and delivery of gender-responsive programs. WGOs partnerships can significantly contribute to the development and implementation of such analyses. For example, by informing the design of context-appropriate research tools; identification of and access to target communities; and/or interpretation of data findings, WGO engagement in gender analysis is key for ensuring data collection and analysis results in programmatic decisions that actively respond to women and girls' real needs, concerns and priorities. In doing so, WGO partnerships have the potential to strengthen women and girls' agency in humanitarian contexts, while promoting more accountable and responsive programming.

*See the complete list of the Gender Equality CCCs here: [UNICEF 2020](#).

WHY PARTNER WITH WOMEN-AND GIRL-LED ORGANIZATIONS?

Women- and girl-led organizations (WGOs) are often the first to respond to the needs of their communities at the onset of a crisis. This may mean providing essential services to women, girls, and other marginalized groups, raising awareness around risks to the rights of women and girls, or demanding government accountability. **Yet, despite a number of international commitments, an extensive literature on the importance of partnering with WGOs, and a growing body of evidence on how to do so—WGOs continue to be excluded from decision-making spaces and funding opportunities** (CARE 2020, VOICE 2021, UN Women 2021). Indeed, eight months into the COVID-19 pandemic, a rapid assessment by Oxfam found that 33 percent of surveyed WGOs laid off anywhere between 1 and 10 members, and 9 percent of organizations had to close down all together due to a lack of funding—this, at a time where WGOs' advocacy and services were most needed (Oxfam 2021). WGOs' exclusion not only undermines the effectiveness of humanitarian action, but also impedes the potential for transformative impact. More specifically, partnering with WGOs is critical for successful gender-responsive humanitarian action, for the following reasons, among others:

1. Emergency contexts are dynamic and ever-changing. For a number of factors, humanitarian agencies may lack access to timely, quality data on how new developments in an emergency may impact targeted communities, especially those hardest to reach. In such contexts, community-based WGOs can be critical allies. As first-responders in a crisis and, often, members or representatives of targeted communities, [WGOs can provide rapid feedback on how emergency contexts have shifted, and how these shifts may require programmatic adjustments](#). This is especially key in humanitarian situations with overlapping crises and chain effects on essential services.
2. Given their connections to target communities, [WGOs can also play a key role in supporting community outreach, in order to ensure no one is left behind in humanitarian response](#). In particular, WGOs—compared to other civil society organizations (CSOs) who may not focus specifically on the rights of women and girls—are likely to have a greater understanding of the diverse ecosystem of women and girls, and how to identify and reach different sub-groups. For example, WGOs may have a better understanding of the specific barriers adolescent mothers face compared to girls with disabilities, and how to overcome these different barriers. Community-based WGOs may also have greater access to—and trust within—rural and remote communities, which are also often the most vulnerable in an emergency situation. Therefore, strong partnerships with WGOs can prove critical for expanding
3. Evidence indicates that WGO partnerships are not only critical for developing more responsive programs—but also for [ensuring that humanitarian interventions take into consideration and mitigate any potential risks of violent backlash](#). Gender programming that is viewed by community leaders as violating local norms runs the risk of provoking violent backlash (UNFPA & UNICEF 2020). However, partnering with WGOs can help reduce this risk, as local organizations have greater insight into what is contextually appropriate and safe. Furthermore, evidence also indicates that programming that is seen as led by local leaders (rather than 'outsiders') strengthens trust and community buy-in (Domínguez et al 2015).
4. Furthermore, [extensive data shows that the most effective way to advance gender equality is to directly invest in local organizations and movements advancing the rights of women and girls](#), particularly those dedicated to social, legal, and political change. For example, a 2012 study that analyzed a 70-country dataset from 1975 to 2005 found that the autonomous mobilization of women was the most crucial factor accounting for domestic policy change on violence against women—that is, even more statistically predictive than national wealth or the local political structure (Htun & Weldon 2012; Htun & Weldon 2013). Similarly, a 2018 study analyzing data from 50 African countries found that legislative reform on women's rights was significantly less likely without action by domestic women's coalitions (Kang & Tripp 2018; Girard 2019). There is also a growing evidence base on the possibilities of leveraging moments of instability to secure gender equality gains—depending, in part, on how women's movements are activated or engaged in the humanitarian response (for example, see Pincha 2010; Moreno & Shaw 2018). Therefore, if the goal of gender-responsive humanitarian action is to sustainably advance gender equality, investment in and partnerships with WGOs is a required action.
5. Lastly, [partnering with WGOs is a smart investment for supporting disaster preparedness and long-term recovery, given that WGOs work across the humanitarian-development nexus](#). WGOs lead gender equality work before, during, and after a crisis. Supporting their work helps communities prepare for disasters (communities where women and girls' enjoy greater rights are less likely to suffer from the gendered impacts of a crisis); leverage moments of instability to secure gender equality gains (as during crisis, there may be a potential window of opportunity to challenge pre-existing discriminatory norms and practices); and develop the building-blocks for a more just long-term recovery (by supporting a more active and equitable civic society, where the rights of women and girls are respected).

programmatic reach, as well as building trust and engagement with diverse communities.

WHAT BARRIERS DO WOMEN- AND GIRL-LED ORGANIZATIONS FACE TO SUCCESSFULLY PARTNER WITH INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS?

1. **Lack of funding** ► What can be done to address this barrier?

- **Map the ecosystem of existing WGOs, early on.** We can't support WGOs without knowing where they are and what they're doing. This is why mapping out existing WGOs is a key strategic action for emergency preparedness. This mapping process should highlight relevant factors, such as (a) whether they have an existing contract with UNICEF or other international partners; (b) the legal status of organizations (ie: are they legally incorporated, or more informal?); (c) their existing mandate and capacities (ie: what is their primary mission?); and (d) the communities they currently serve, and in what capacity. Ideally, this mapping process also includes a verification stage: which WGOs are most trusted by local communities?
- **Reach each out to WGOs to apply for consultancies.** Once we have mapped out existing WGOs, it is easier to identify partners when new consultancies or collaborative opportunities arise. For some WGOs, the process of partnering with an international organization via a formal consultancy might be a new concept, and thus require some initial training and support. This is also why directly reaching out (rather than waiting for WGOs to reach out to your office and apply independently) is important for connecting WGOs to partnership opportunities, which might otherwise be overlooked or left unknown. Research and design with WGOs indicates that consultancy-models of funding can also help protect WGOs from exploitation (ie: using WGOs time and expertise without any sort of financial compensation) and support more sustainable income flows (UN Women 2020a).
- **Compensate WGOs for their time and expertise.** Consulting community members and leaders, which often includes members of WGOs, is an important best practice for designing, implementing, and monitoring gender-responsive programs. However, consultations are often planned without open conversations on how to compensate participants' for their time. Failing to establish shared agreements regarding compensation not only runs the risk of developing tokenistic partnerships—but also undermines WGOs' financial sustainability.
- **Facilitate networking at national and international levels.** UNICEF can play a unique role in facilitating networking and partnerships at a variety of levels. Partnerships between WGOs and the government are critical for strengthening local response systems and inclusive governance, as well as opening opportunities

for WGOs to secure state contracts. Partnerships between WGOs and national and international CSOs can promote peer-to-peer learning, and the creation of powerful alliances. Lastly, partnerships between WGOs and other international agencies can help open the door for new funding opportunities for WGOs, thus supporting their long-term growth and sustainability. Partnerships with non-traditional stakeholders, such as the private sector or local academic institutions, can also support WGOs' access to new opportunities and overall capacity development.

- **Whenever possible, provide fixed, long term funding.** Prior to COVID-19, only 8 percent of gender-related aid dedicated to civil society went directly to organizations in the Global South—of this, little was reported to benefit women's rights organizations. Where funding does reach WGOs, it is often via restrictive or short-term funding modalities that many small- and medium-sized organizations cannot access, or that are administratively highly taxing, and financially unsustainable (UN Women 2021). In order to most effectively support WGOs financial stability, provide fixed, long-term funding. While country offices' may not always be capable of providing this type of funding, they can also support WGOs' financial sustainability by connecting them with funders that can provide such arrangements.
- **Assist WGOs organisational strengthening and staff upskilling.** Lastly, it is important to keep dialogue open with WGOs about their plans or preferences for long-term capacity development. Where does the organization see itself in 5 years, and what type of training or upskilling could help them reach those goals? For example, organizational strengthening might help WGOs seek new sources of funding, or better track and market their program impacts. While sharing recommendations for capacity-building with partners can at times be helpful, it is important to respect WGOs' autonomy in shaping their organization's future plans, rather than pressuring growth based on UNICEF's preferences. This will ensure a more sustainable and organic growth process.

2. **Lack of access to decision-making spaces** ► What can be done to address this barrier?

- **First, listen to women and girls.** There are a number of guidelines on the need to include women and girls, and the organizations that represent them, in humanitarian clusters (for example, see IASC 2021). This goal reflects the importance of ensuring women and girl's access to emergency response decision-making spaces. However, it is also important to first ask the WGOs in your country's context: what

would meaningful participation and leadership in decision-making spaces look like for them? For some WGOs, participating in inter-agency clusters may be less of a priority than participating in community or city leadership bodies. Based on WGOs preferences, look for ways to facilitate their access to these decision-making spaces.

- **Facilitate dialogue with local government authorities.** Some WGOs may have contentious or fraught relationships with local government authorities, for a number of legitimate reasons—including local government’s exclusion of WGOs from decision-making spaces. International organizations can play an important role in facilitating dialogue between WGOs and local governments to strengthen trust and coordination, and in doing so, support WGOs access to (a) new funding opportunities; (b) effective participation in public policy design and implementation; and (c) opportunities to monitor government investment in the rights of women and children, thus strengthening the state’s accountability to human rights and gender equality commitments.
- **Conduct meetings in the local language.** Language barriers have been identified as a common barrier to local communities’ access to humanitarian decision-making spaces. Investing in translation services, or seeking out other creative ways to address this barrier, is an important step towards ensuring WGOs, and other local organizations’, access to decision-making spaces.
- **Consult WGOs about the ideal time and location of meetings.** Participation in decision-making spaces also depends on the time and location of events. For example, if meetings are conducted online, do local WGOs have internet access? If meetings are conducted in a city center, do local WGOs have access to transportation? What time are meetings conducted, and how might this create conflicts with WGOs’ other commitments?

3. **Inequitable partnerships** ► What can be done to address this barrier?

- **Create spaces for knowledge exchange.** Two-way knowledge exchanges between international organizations and local partners are critical for (a) recognizing local expertise; (b) learning from local approaches, which may often be more effective than international, top-down approaches; and (c) developing stronger, more equitable partnerships. Indeed, providing a space for these exchanges is especially important for gender-responsive programming, given that local WGOs have unique insights into the needs, concerns and priorities of the communities in which they work, and are also often skilled at tracking the

impact of their work from a feminist perspective, specifically capturing and understanding long-term changes in power relations and social norms.

- **Create opportunities for communication and feedback.** Without clear guidelines on how to share communication and feedback, WGOs may not feel comfortable openly sharing with international organizations, given the often inequitable power dynamics between international organizations and local partners. Therefore, it is important early on in the partnership to establish clear communication channels. What modalities of communication are preferred? (For example, in some contexts WhatsApp may be a more common form of communication among CSOs, compared to email.) Are there any potential barriers to communication? If so, how can those be addressed?
- **Engage WGOs across the program cycle.** Participation becomes tokenistic when partners are only engaged at one point in the program cycle. In order to strengthen your partnership with WGOs, involve them at all stages of the program cycle, whenever possible. At a minimum, if WGOs participate at one point in the program cycle, they should be informed about updates to the program, and how their engagement has impacted decisions. (For example, if a WGO is consulted during the assessment, it is important to follow up with them to inform them how their participation has shaped the program design).
- **Minimize turnover in staff to foster relationships and trust among participants.** Partnerships may feel inequitable when there is a lack of trust among participants. This has been especially well documented in emergency contexts, where staff turnover may be high, which makes relationship- and trust-building more difficult. In order to cultivate stronger partnerships with WGOs, look for opportunities to reduce staff turnover or establish a consistent representative to lead local partnerships (for example, fixed-term positions rather than short-term consultants should be the focal points for partnerships).

4. **Lack of security** ► What can be done to address this barrier?

- **Discuss potential risks and mitigation strategies with women and girls.** Partnering with humanitarian organizations, or taking on leadership roles in the emergency response, visibilizes women, girls, and the organizations they represent—which may also create additional security risks. This dynamic has been especially well-documented in conflict and post-conflict settings (Zulver, 2021). In order to ensure partnerships

do not create any additional risks to women and girls' safety, facilitate an open dialogue with women and girls about any potential risks of partnering with your organization. Then, work together to co-design risk mitigation strategies. This approach is critical for ensuring a more context-appropriate and thus more impactful risk mitigation strategy, while also illustrating respect for local WGOs expertise.

- **Facilitate dialogue between WGOs and state actors, to develop bottom-up protection strategies.** Ultimately, the state is accountable for ensuring women and girls' safety, by prioritizing women and girls' access to justice, training public employees and state authorities to apply a gender-perspective to their work, and eliminating impunity. Therefore, humanitarian organizations should also sup-

port dialogue between WGOs and state actors, in order to support greater accountability to women and girls' rights to these fundamental rights and protections.

- **Invest in safe spaces.** A persistent barrier to women and girls' participation in humanitarian action is the lack of safe spaces to gather, share and mobilize. Women and girl safe spaces (WGSS) are key interventions for addressing this barrier—not only for the purpose of facilitating women and girls' participation in humanitarian activities, but also for strengthening social networks, building knowledge and skills, and supporting women and girls' empowerment. As such, humanitarian organizations dedicated to strengthening partnerships with WGOs should also invest in and support the development of safe spaces.*

How are UNICEF Country Offices partnering with women- and girl-led organizations?

■ International organizations, like UNICEF, can play a key role in facilitating dialogue between WGOs and state actors. For example, **UNICEF Madagascar** has partnered with a diverse range of CSOs, including a number of WGOs, to support the development of a National Gender Policy. In doing so, UNICEF has provided a space for CSOs to work together, and to then present a collective proposal to government actors. This has helped strengthen both UNICEF's partnerships with CSOs, while also supporting their access to state-level decision-making spaces.

■ Likewise, **UNICEF Maldives** has promoted dialogue and coordination between WGOs and the local government, in order to advance the national GBV response. The global pandemic prompted a spike in demand for GBV related services, including access to legal and psychosocial support for women and children, especially victim-survivors of GBV. However, government service-providers lacked the capacity to meet this rising demand. In response, UNICEF rapidly identified WGOs with potential for GBV service provision, and has

helped facilitate their partnerships with the local government in order to expand services. This partnership model not only helps address gaps in GBV service-provision, but also promotes WGOs' financial sustainability and access to state-level decision-making spaces.

■ **UNICEF Malaysia** has also leveraged partnerships with WGOs to rapidly adapt programming and address increased risks of GBV at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, by creating spaces for two-way knowledge exchange between UNICEF and a local WGO, they were able to advance a more intersectional GBV response: while the local organization (Women's Aid Organization) provided training on local GBV service provision, UNICEF provided training on disability rights. Together, they have been able to strengthen local capacities for GBV response, and support risk mitigation efforts across diverse sectors.

■ **UNICEF Bosnia and Herzegovina's** education programming illustrates another creative model for civil society engagement. During the COVID-19 pandemic,

UNICEF developed an innovative pilot training program to strengthen gender-responsive teaching strategies among primary and secondary school teachers. To do so, they required an implementing partner with a very specific set of expertise—yet it was difficult to find any single organization that held all the skills necessary.

■ However, UNICEF identified a CSO implementing partner with an expansive network. This allowed for the team to bring together a greater diversity of stakeholders with varied perspectives and expertise to inform the training methodology, while also strengthening the program's reach. For example, their chosen implementing partner helped facilitate UNICEF's engagement with local feminist academics, which proved critical for developing a more locally-contextualized and transformative training curriculum. This experience illustrates the importance of bringing together diverse perspectives and looking beyond traditional humanitarian stakeholders to identify and engage local feminist hubs and women's rights actors.

Checklist: Key questions to ask when developing or strengthening partnerships with women- and girl-led organizations

SETTING THE FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIPS

- What was the most recent mapping of WGOs? Does this include data on organizations' mandates, size or capacity, legal-status (ie: is it a formalized organization?), strengths, and weaknesses? In this process, have you engaged with local authorities to see if they have already conducted a mapping? Have you reached out to local academics (particularly feminist academics), or other non-traditional stakeholders in the humanitarian response?
- Who is the focal point for local WGO partnerships? Does this focal point hold a fixed-term position, or a short-term consultancy?
- Have you discussed expectations around communication and feedback? In doing so, have you identified any potential barriers to communication? How will your office address those barriers in order to ensure WGOs' access to open communication?
- Have you discussed potential security risks to WGOs participation in the humanitarian response? How can you work together to mitigate any potential risks?
- Have you discussed with WGOs their experiences with decision-making spaces? Which decision-making spaces are they currently engaged with? Which ones are they not? Is there an opportunity for UNICEF to help facilitate their access to new decision-making spaces, based on WGOs' preferences?

STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS

- How can you facilitate knowledge sharing between UNICEF and local partners, including WGOs and CSOs representing other marginalized communities? What are potential opportunities to support two-way knowledge sharing?
- At what parts of the program cycle are you engaging WGOs? Are there opportunities to engage them across the program cycle (and not just during the assessment stage)?
- For example, following collaborations with WGOs, have you created a safe space for open feedback, lesson learning, and discussion of next steps for strengthening or expanding partnerships?

SUPPORTING WOMEN- AND GIRL-LED ORGANIZATIONS' GROWTH AND SUSTAINABILITY

- Think about the most recent TORs that were shared with your office (or that your office developed): did you reach out to WGOs to apply for these consultancies? If not, why? Are there ways to improve WGOs access to new consultancies or work bids?
- When engaging with WGO partners, how are they compensated for their time and expertise? Have you had an open conversation with partners about financial compensation?
- Are there opportunities for longer-term funding? If not, are there opportunities to help connect WGOs with longer-term financial support?

* For more on safe spaces, see Action Learning Brief #1.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES:

For more in-depth discussion on the importance of engaging with WGOs across the program cycle, as well as sector-specific recommendations on how to do so, we recommend consulting the IASC's [Gender for Humanitarian Action Handbook \(2018\)](#).

Likewise, CARE's '[Gender & Localising Aid](#)' report (2017) provides another evidence-based discussion on the importance of partnering with WGOs, along with findings and practical recommendations from their research on working with local CSOs in emergency contexts.

Part of UN Women's COVID-19 policy brief series, [COVID-19 and women's rights organizations: Bridging response gaps and demanding a more just future](#) highlights the impacts of the COVID-19 on WGOs, their important role as frontline responders to the gendered impacts of the pandemic, and pathways for governments, donors, and international organizations to better support WGOs.

VOICE's 2021 report [We Must Do Better: A Feminist Assessment of the Humanitarian Aid System's Support of Women- and Girl-Led Organizations during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#), as well as their 2019 report in collaboration with the International Rescue Committee, [Where's the Money?](#) both provide strong evidence on the international humanitarian community's failure to invest in WGOs and, relatedly, GBV programming in emergencies.

ADDITIONAL WORKS CITED:

- [Afghanistan Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group \(GiHA\) 2021](#). 11 Tips for Strengthening Women's Participation in Assessments.
- [Asian Development Bank \(ADB\) 2009](#). Civil Society Organization Sourcebook: A Guide To Cooperation with Civil Society Organizations.
- [CARE 2020](#). Where are the Women? The Conspicuous Absence of Women in COVID-19 Response Teams and Plans, and Why We Need Them.
- [Domingo, P., Holmes, R., O'Neil, T., Jones, N., Bird, K., Larson, A., Presler-Marshall, E., & Valters, C. 2015](#). Women's Voice and Leadership in Decision-Making: Assessing the Evidence. Overseas Development Institute (ODI).
- [Girard, Françoise 2019](#). Philanthropy for the Women's Movement, Not Just 'Empowerment'
- [Htun, Mala and S. Laurel Weldon 2012](#). The Civic Origins of Progressive Policy Change: Combating Violence against Women in Global Perspective, 1975–2005. *American Political Science Review* 106(3).
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- [IASC 2021](#). Strengthening Participation, Representation And Leadership Of Local And National Actors In IASC Humanitarian Coordination Mechanisms.
- [Kang, Alice and Aili Mari Tripp 2018](#). Coalitions Matter: Citizenship, Women, and Quota Adoption in Africa. *Perspectives on Politics*. 16(1).
- [Moreno, Jenny and Duncan Shaw 2018](#). Women's empowerment following disaster: A longitudinal study of social change. *Natural Hazards* 92: 205–224.
- [Oxfam 2015](#). Re-politicising Intersectionality: How an intersectional perspective can help INGOs be better allies to women's rights movements.
- [Pincha, Chaman 2016](#). Shifting Spaces of Women in Tamil Nadu: Transformation through disaster response.
- [UNICEF 2020a](#). Fact Sheet: Civil Society Engagement in the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme To End Child Marriage.
- [UNICEF 2020b](#). Minimum Quality Standards and Indicators for Community Engagement.
- [UNICEF 2020c](#). Summary Guidelines to Integrating AAP into the Country Programme Planning Cycles.
- [UNICEF & VOICE 2021](#). UNICEF Gender Equality Strategy & Plan Background Paper (Presentation slides).
- [UN Women 2020a](#). Women CSOs of the Future: A Design-Led Exploration With Women's CSOs of Possible Responses to Current and Future Challenges.
- [UN Women 2020b](#). 'Who holds the microphone?' Crisis-affected women's voices on gender-transformative changes in humanitarian settings: Experiences from Bangladesh, Colombia, Jordan and Uganda.
- [Women Deliver 2019](#). Feminist Humanitarian System Building Block I: Advancing Gender-Transformative Localization.
- [Women's Refugees Commission \(WRC\) 2021](#). Understanding Past Experiences to Strengthen Feminist Responses to Crises and Forced Displacement.
- [Van Wessel et al. 2021](#). Civil society dynamics: Shaping roles, navigating contexts.
- [Zulver 2021](#). When building peace is dangerous work for women. *Ladysmith Policy Brief* No. 2.