

Women bridging Peace, Security, and Humanitarian Action

Integrating Women, Peace & Security and Humanitarian Action
2024



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To meet the needs of women and girls affected by war and armed conflict, we must examine the goals of the women, peace and security agenda and ensure that humanitarian action is inclusive, responsive, with women participating and leading. This document explores the experiences of members of the Karama network in responding to the challenges and opportunities of working on women, peace and security and humanitarian action.

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Karama Founder & CEO: Hibaaq Osman

Consultation lead: Indai Sajor

Contributors: Maysoon Albadry, Suzan Aref, Brigitte Chelebian, Waillet Gorgess, Liza Hido, Dr Azza Kamel, Amal Kreishe

Contributing editor: Perrin Elkind, PhD

Editor: Phil Evans

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Introduction

In international and local response to armed conflicts, war and onset emergency crisis, there has long been a dichotomy between work on humanitarian action and the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda. Increasingly however, we are seeing efforts aimed at bringing together these two fields to generate a more effective and inclusive response.

The [Generation Equality Compact on Women, Peace and Security and Humanitarian Action \(WPS-HA\) states](#) that the WPS agenda and humanitarian action both:

“[R]equire a coordinated approach to achieve long lasting, sustainable peace and reduce risks and vulnerabilities...Building on the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, the Compact contributes to efforts to ensure that conflicts and crises are comprehensively addressed from beginning to end, with gender equality at the core.”

To properly implement the WPS agenda and meet humanitarian challenges, might it be necessary and would it be possible to build on the linkages between these fields?

If we are to achieve progress in doing so, we need to understand the conceptual and practical frameworks for WPS and humanitarian action. We must also consider the already existing practice and currents within these agendas, exploring where these complement each other, and where they diverge.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WPS AND HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Looking at the challenges in implementing WPS and humanitarian action, it is instructive to recognize that most humanitarian crises are conflict related. From the perspective of Karama, a network of women’s groups and activists working in Africa and the Arab region, it is also relevant that our region is disproportionately affected by conflict-related humanitarian crisis, with UNHCR reporting:

- Palestine: as of 26 January 2024, more than 26,000 Palestinians have been killed in Israel’s assault on Gaza, of which over 10,000 are children. More than 7,000 people are missing and over 64,400 have been injured. Women, children and newborns in Gaza are disproportionately bearing the burden of the escalation of hostilities, both as casualties and from denial of food and health services
- Yemen: 21.6 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, with more than 4.5 million people displaced internally
- Sudan: 5.4 million people have been displaced by the conflict
- Iraq: 3 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance
- South Sudan: the largest refugee crisis in Africa, with 2 million people internally displaced, 2,3 million South Sudanese hosted in neighboring countries, while the country itself hosts 330,000 refugees, mainly from the conflict in Sudan

In addition to these conflicts, we note that recent natural disasters have killed thousands and affected hundreds of thousands more in Morocco and Libya. As such, humanitarian response that is sensitive and responsive to local needs has particular resonance for our region.

Inclusive leadership is vital for an effective and gender-sensitive response. Yet the crises in the Arab region are happening in a context in which women are drastically underrepresented in decision-making positions. The region has the lowest level of women’s representation in parliaments anywhere in the world - just 16.3 percent of the region’s legislators are women, compared to a global average of 26.5 percent.

Government and INGO responses to the crises we face in our work are rooted in this context: one in which women are excluded from decision-making, more likely to experience conflict, and disproportionately affected when their lives are touched by such violence.

Complementary and divergent aspects of WPS and Humanitarian agendas

Humanitarian action and the WPS agenda concepts were well-established in practice by humanitarian organizations, governments, regional and bodies, and women’s groups prior to their formalization in United Nations resolutions:

- [UN General Assembly resolution 46/182](#) passed in 1991, establishing that “humanitarian assistance must be provided in accordance with the principles of humanity, neutrality, and impartiality”. Subsequently in 2004, [General Assembly resolution 58/114](#) would add independence as a core principle
- [UN Security Council Resolution 1325](#) passed in 2000, formalizing women, peace and security under four pillars: protection, prevention, participation, and relief and recovery.

CONTRAST BETWEEN HUMANITARIAN ACTION AND WPS

Contrasting with the WPS agenda, the humanitarian agenda has been based on strictly de-politicized principles, where aims such as increasing women’s participation and seeking protection through accountability remain more contentious matters. However, it is important to understand recent currents in humanitarian action.

The [New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants in 2016](#), along with the [Global Compact on Refugees from 2018](#), articulate essential pledges aimed at recognizing the substantial role of women in leadership within refugee situations. Additionally, the [Peace Promise](#) in 2016 underscores the significance of peace, humanitarian efforts, and development organizations in constructing and upholding peace.

Published for the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, the [Agenda for Humanity](#) set out core responsibilities, along with core commitments for humanitarian action attached to each (see right). Also launched at the summit, the [Grand Bargain](#) prioritizes support for increasing “leadership, delivery and capacity of local responders and the participation of affected communities in addressing humanitarian needs”.

INTERSECTIONS & SIMILARITIES BETWEEN HUMANITARIAN ACTION AND WPS

There is significant overlap between these currents in humanitarian action and women, peace and security. For example, in the Agenda for Humanity, prevent and end conflicts overlaps with the prevention and participation pillars; respect the rules of war overlaps with protection; leave no one behind overlaps with relief and recovery; work differently to end need and invest in humanity overlap with prevention.

In addition, many of the core principles of the Agenda for Humanity and the Grand Bargain intersect within the practical implementation of the WPS agenda, such as the importance placed on localization. Central to making the WPS agenda a reality, the development of National Action Plans (NAPs) have been a key demand for women’s groups across our network. From Iraq and Palestine, to Jordan, Yemen, Sudan and across the region, our partners have been involved in the movements to develop and implement NAPs. These campaigns have had to translate the international frameworks of Security Council resolutions into a language that can be understood and seen as relevant locally in order to build support for them at community level. These coalitions have used this broad support to build political will for the development of NAPs by governments. Despite important successes, the failure by governments to properly resource and implement NAPs is an enduring problem globally.

Fundamental for understanding the nexus is that the effects of armed conflict inevitably lead to a need for humanitarian emergency response, as well as for inclusive and effective conflict resolution and a just and equitable peace. This is where women’s rights advocates recognize the intersectionality between WPS and humanitarian action.

Karama partners have spoken of how their approach to implementing the WPS agenda can be applied to humanitarian action. The direct impacts of conflict are intersectional, with the impact closely related to the context. Our partners note that the forms of oppression that existed prior to the conflict itself powerfully influence the humanitarian consequences. For response to be effective, we need to be addressing that context before, during, and post-conflict. We feel that WPS - in particular the way that women’s civil society groups have approached implementation of the WPS agenda - provides a way of understanding and approaching this issue in a way that humanitarian action can apply.

Our colleagues have spoken of the need to approach humanitarian response with a gender lens, considering the unique needs of different populations within a given context - for example, meeting the needs of children, older people, persons with disabilities, and survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. These issues should be addressed in partnership with government authorities, UN entities and humanitarian organizations to have a comprehensive response to humanitarian crisis



Practical and conceptual barriers

Women's groups who want to break down the barriers between WPS and humanitarian action are still experiencing difficulties to achieving integration.

Many of our partners feel that concepts of humanitarian action are too limited and would benefit from a WPS lens. Civil society organizations that take a holistic view of their communities feel strongly that there is a need for gender analysis and gender responsiveness in assessing humanitarian work. While shelter, food, and medicines are necessity, health, educational and psychosocial support are vital considerations.

Justice and accountability are also important to the wellbeing of those receiving humanitarian support. People who are survivors of human rights violations, conflict-related sexual violence, breaches of humanitarian law all want justice. Survivors want the harms they have experienced to be recognized, so we need to bring justice to the table of humanitarian action. Humanitarian response needs to include documenting crimes, creating specialist groups to support victims, gather evidence, and ensure transparency and accountability for war crimes and crimes against humanity under international law and international humanitarian law.

“WE TRIED TO WORK WITH OCHA, TO COVER PART OF PROTECTION, COVERING ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND LEGAL SUPPORT. THEY SAID THAT JUSTICE WASN'T PART OF HUMANITARIAN SUPPORT. IT WAS A BUREAUCRATIC PROCESS THAT DID NOT FOCUS ON THE NEEDS OF WOMEN.” - BRIGITTE CHELEBIAN

Our partners have reported that they have brought these issues to humanitarian coordinators but were rebuffed. In order to foster more effective and inclusive humanitarian response, we need to have a more comprehensive view of humanitarian needs, priorities, and the context of women and girls.

There are further barriers to more integrated approaches by bureaucratic processes. These exist across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, and ultimately favor large, international organizations over smaller, grassroots and community-based groups.

Across all areas of work, we need to be better at making sure that local groups can access funding and contribute across the board where their expertise and local credibility can be remarkable assets. We are seeing this in humanitarian policy and commitments, but to what extent is it a reality in humanitarian action?





Questioning international instruments to improve their utility

Women's civil society has remained remarkably resilient through an extraordinarily challenging period, when the need for gender responsive humanitarian action and the demands of the WPS agenda have never been greater.

Given the extraordinary social and political currents that women's groups in Africa and the Arab region have experienced in recent years - revolutions, civil wars, political instability, occupation, financial crises, the pandemic - they have had to prove themselves adaptable and resilient in order to survive. Even in these rapidly changing contexts, they have still achieved remarkable progress: discriminatory laws abolished, new protections enshrined in legislation and constitutions, greater funding and focus on priority issues.

Women's movements continue to prove they can make an impact nationally and internationally, and have much to contribute to making humanitarian response more effective.

From the work and practice of our partners, however, we can see governments in the region are not learning from the past. Women's groups who have had to respond to armed conflict in the region feel that every time such violence flares up, governments' response has been to reinvent the wheel.

Once there is an armed conflict on the horizon, there has not been a plan in place by government for what to do, nor in case of onset emergencies. It is essential that we learn from past conflicts - in particular how to protect women and children - what kind of emergency plan should be in place, and what kind of humanitarian plan governments will implement.

We as civil society see the threat of broader conflict right now. Assessments are being made, capacity and requirements evaluated. If this is being done at the level of civil society, then governments must be doing the same. Where they are doing so, we must ask whether they are prioritizing or even considering the role of women? We see that there is a clear role for peacebuilders in this work. When there were clear indicators and risk factors that many others could clearly identify and over which alarms were raised, we should not be responding with surprise when it is too late. There are many ways to protect women, ways to deal with the problems raised by conflict, but decision makers are not preparing, or they are preparing partially and insufficiently.

Learning, preparing, responding and leading quickly and effectively are goals that can potentially be achieved by adopting gender responsiveness to humanitarian preparation and response, by the integration of WPS approaches and humanitarian action.

"WE LOOK AT WHAT HAS BEEN ACHIEVED IN THE REVOLUTIONS, WE STILL CAN SAY THAT THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS HAVE BEEN ABLE TO GIVE VOICE TO THE VOICELESS."
- AMAL KREISHE

Women's Leadership and Participation in WPS and Humanitarian Action

Our consultations have reinforced our own experience - that there is no substitute for having advocates for the women's agenda in positions to make decisions and allocate resources.

IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

It is recognized that deeply embedded discrimination against women at the organizational, cultural, social, financial and political levels is exacerbated in armed conflict and by organizational disparities, making it more challenging for women to progress in contexts such as humanitarian settings. Yet women can be at the forefront of improving humanitarian response for conflict-affected populations through service delivery, education and capacity strengthening, advocacy and research. Despite global commitments to improving gender equality and empowerment of women, the issue of increasing women's leadership in humanitarian action has been given little or no attention, projecting a one-sided male dominated face of humanitarian work.

In the past years there are available opportunities and initiatives and inspirational experiences of a number of women leaders in humanitarian work and endorsements for empowering and supporting women's leadership have always been a goal. However, there had been no committed and strategic programming with the necessary tools to enhance women's leadership in humanitarian action. Advocating for women leaders in the humanitarian sector is crucial to increasing effective interventions that adequately address the complexity and diversity of humanitarian crises.

What is the role of women refugees, IDPs and women's organizations in humanitarian work, cognizant that women are disproportionately affected by armed conflict and humanitarian emergencies? Yet during humanitarian emergencies the gap between men's and women's involvement in humanitarian response decreases for women, as they suffer more from the indirect and long-term consequences of armed conflict and natural disasters, such as sexual violence, lack of access to healthcare and socio-economic inequalities and discrimination.

There are four main types of barrier to women's leadership in humanitarian action:

1. Disconnect between women and women's organizations and the humanitarian system.
2. Socio-cultural and political constraints.
3. Donor priorities and limited support of local women's organizations.
4. Gender biased norms favoring men.

Local women's organizations generally struggle to be integrated into the mainstream humanitarian coordination system, making it a challenge for them to gain recognition as significant humanitarian actors, due to lack of recognition of the good work that women leaders can contribute to humanitarian response. If women and women's organizations are not considered humanitarian actors, the crises on the ground are not adequately addressed, perpetuating inequality and women will likely be excluded from capacity-building and funding opportunities.

IN WPS

Our partners report that despite two decades of the WPS agenda asserting the importance of participation, many male decision makers continue to hold negative stereotypes about women, seeing them only as victims when it comes to conflict, rather than as partners in prevention, resolution and peacebuilding. This situation would be bad enough if it were limited to local governments, however, our partners have seen that these attitudes permeate the UN system, which then also treats women as victims, undermining the WPS agenda it claims to promote.



In Iraq, for example, our partners have seen that policy instruments meant to build normative frameworks for inclusion have instead been retooled and incorporated by local parties in order to carry on politics as usual. Political parties have used the quota system to consolidate themselves into power and influence, to the extent that despite increasing the representation of women in parliament, the women's caucus is often more hostile to women's rights causes. It was in this way that the Ja'fari law on jurisprudence and personal status, which among many regressive provisions would have lowered the age of marriage to 9 years-old for girls, was put forward by women legislators.

This is an extremely difficult problem because we know that women's participation is vital for the implementation of the WPS agenda - indeed, many of our partners view participation as the most important pillar, and the means with which to secure implementation of the agenda as a whole. The drive for women's quotas is based on the transformative potential of women's participation - the experience that when women participate, the processes and outcomes will be improved for all. As such it is anathema for quotas to be assimilated and used as a means of consolidating the status quo, while giving the appearance of increased inclusivity.

Our partners stress that we need women with power and influence who support and understand UNSCR 1325 in order to develop proper NAPs, to provide resources, to ensure protection, prevention, relief and recovery. Participation is key for humanitarian action that responds to community needs.

Conversely, we see that when there is no women's participation, there is no progress at all.

As with peace building, effective humanitarian response relies on inclusivity. As noted by Veronique Barbelet and Caitlin Wake in the [ODI working paper Inclusion and exclusion in humanitarian action](#), "[f]ailing to reach individuals who are marginalised and excluded means that humanitarian actors cannot claim to uphold the principle of impartiality, which is at the heart of the humanitarian mission."

Ensuring that groups are included in the design and implementation of response to the threat of conflict, conflict itself and post-conflict is then a shared goal of both the humanitarian and WPS agendas. However, as noted above and by Barbelet and Wake, participation is an issue complicated by contextual and political factors.

Coda

Where does the organized backlash against the women's agenda, and waning confidence in the international system lead us?

Despite making some important progress, in over two decades the WPS agenda has not led to the kind of transformative change for women and girls that advocates had hoped it would.

In this time, has it even been properly integrated at the UN? For example, at the recent Paris Peace Forum, the former UN Special Envoy for Libya Ghassan Salamé dismissed UNSCR 1325 as “political correctness”.

The failure to make real progress in realizing the goals of the WPS agenda, or to even properly embed it at the United Nations, as well as the current state of global security are undermining confidence in even those most committed to the potential of multilateral work for peace and humanitarian action. This reaction is particularly acute in our region, where the security and humanitarian situation becomes ever more strained. The conflict in Gaza is rapidly deepening existing fault lines into chasms.

This is a significant issue not only for WPS, but also for progress in more effective humanitarian response and achieving development goals. It is difficult to make international agendas relevant to local communities - particularly when those communities have experienced or are experiencing the trauma of conflict. [Yazidi colleagues reported](#) that when they began talking to their community about the WPS agenda, they initially received an angry response from some who felt that as victims of such egregious crimes, peacebuilding was not their responsibility. Promotion of WPS at this level therefore presented a significant challenge, relying on advocates proving to their community the value of the agenda, as well as their own commitment and integrity. As one consultation participant asked, “what has WPS done for us women?”

The WPS agenda suffers from a lack of holistic implementation, policy coherence, and accountability. There is a persistent gap between rhetoric and concrete action, including on resourcing.

Credibility is hard won but fragile, and local activism will always be seen as part of a wider context. It is not only demoralizing but also profoundly undermining - perhaps fatally so - for activists in Africa and the Arab region to talk about inclusivity, humanitarianism, peace and security when countries that are most identified with promoting these international agendas - the United States, United Kingdom, members of the European Union - are supporting aggression in Gaza that is creating a humanitarian catastrophe, and is also deeply destabilizing the wider region.

The ever-growing discord between the rhetoric of global policy and the reality of local actions is not an issue that communities can simply look past. The key gaps in effective implementation of WPS include militarized investments, tokenized and sidelined women's peace leadership, strong focus on women as victims/survivors of conflict, and absence of context-specific and gender analysis of each situation.

Among our partners are some of the region's most committed activists for the WPS agenda. They have been involved in building grassroots support for WPS; they have built national coalitions calling for implementation; they have worked on drafting NAPs, on implementing them, and monitoring their effectiveness. They provide expertise to their own governments, donor governments, to the Security Council itself. They have seen and experienced the double standards applied in international diplomacy, the contrast between the rhetoric of rules-based orders and the facts of realpolitik - but crucially they have been prepared to work in and with the system.

When there exist powerful, regressive movements deeply opposed to inclusivity, along with growing extremism and populism, and people too attached to an unequal status quo, there are growing barriers to WPS goals and to an inclusive and effective humanitarian response. The activists across our region who find themselves asking fundamental questions about their place in the international system are advocates that the WPS, humanitarian and development agendas cannot afford to lose.

And yet many are asking such questions: who is really committed to these resolutions? Where is the accountability? When we tell the decision makers about the situation for women on the ground, what is it really for - what changes, what is the outcome? Despite years of their own commitment, toil, energy, losses and successes, in Gaza, what they see is a humanitarian disaster and a WPS agenda that just remains ineffective words on paper.

What peace and security is there for the people of Gaza, Sudan, Yemen, Syria, Somalia, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Ukraine and other countries affected directly or indirectly by conflict? This situation undermines not only the UN Security Council as an institution, but everything associated with it, including WPS.

Our partners work extensively with survivors of unfathomable atrocities - sexual violence, slavery, genocide. They have seen the deliberate targeting of vital and emergency infrastructure, of civilians, the use of proscribed weapons in residential areas, the principles of conflict being broken. In contrast, what they do not see is accountability, but a double standard in the application of international law and international humanitarian law (IHL).



“THE ISSUE OF DOUBLE STANDARDS IS CLEAR IN PALESTINE BUT IT'S NOT LIMITED TO THERE. WE DON'T WANT THE HUMAN RIGHTS PRINCIPLES TO BE APPLICABLE TO SOME BUT NOT TO OTHERS. WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND HOW TO ACHIEVE JUSTICE FOR EVERYONE.” - WAILLET GORGESS

Serious and sustained breaches of international law and IHL are being carried out directly by permanent members of the Security Council, or with their blessing, with no consequences. It raises the question: are we seeing a different kind of warfare emerging from this impunity? If so then without doubt it is one in which women and girls will continue to pay the highest price.

It is essential to recognize that some women's organizations may choose not to be part of the formal global humanitarian coordination system. It should be noted that there are several strong women's rights organizations that opted out of the cluster system, as they found it patriarchal and harmful to women's interests. It cannot be presumed that women's organizations want to be part of the humanitarian system if they see the humanitarian system as failing to meet the needs of women, or distinguish themselves as better able to achieve their gender justice aims outside of it. Humanitarian actors must recognize that all contexts have their own set of gender-biased norms that restrict and devalue women's leadership and must therefore avoid perpetuating such practices. Conversely, UN agencies and humanitarian organizations should change their policies and encourage efforts to ensure partnerships with women and women's organizations.

We recognize that much needs to be done to increase women's leadership in WPS and participation in humanitarian action. A clear strategy that specifically focuses on the development of women's leadership and gainful participation should be part of all planning and programming of UN agencies, INGOs and government institutions working in humanitarian response and in disaster risks management. When women are actively participating in humanitarian action, they are able to better implement the WPS agenda.

The most recent global assessment of the extent of humanitarian need globally is 363 million people in need of assistance and protection ([Global Humanitarian Overview OCHA 2023, August](#)), simply staggering when we also consider that more than 50 per cent are women and children. It should be imperative in humanitarian, development and peace principles to recognize that women's leadership in responding to humanitarian crisis eventually leading to peace in their communities could make a difference in the lives of all people at risk.

More and more emphasis is being put on the peace, humanitarian, and development nexus. There is greater discussion of feminist foreign policy. As such we must be ever more aware of and more sensitive to the threats that undermine confidence in the foundations of such work.

