



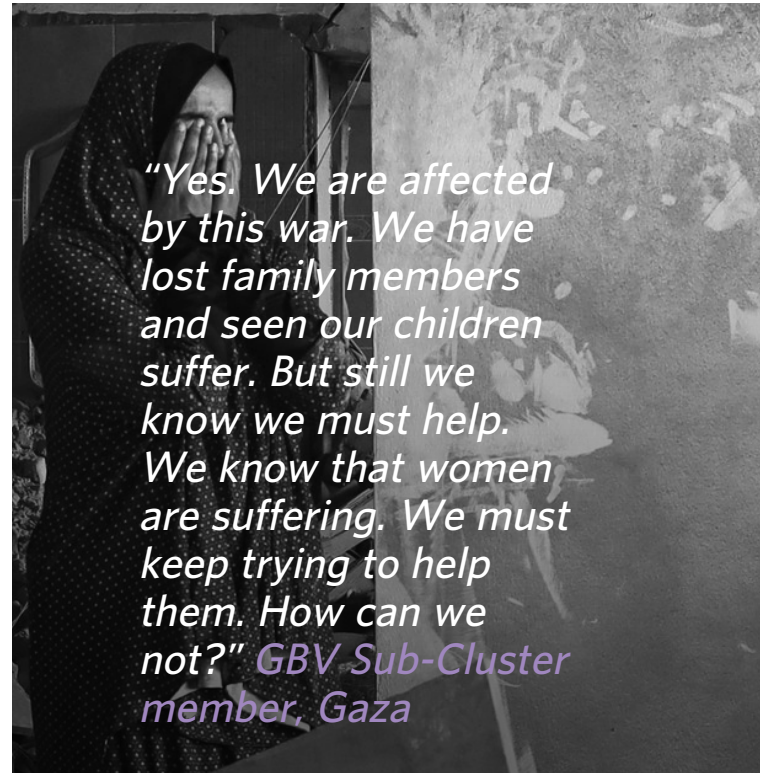
WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANISATIONS AND WOMEN-LED ORGANISATIONS CENTRALITY TO THE GBV RESPONSE IN GAZA

JUNE 2024

The humanitarian needs in Gaza are extraordinary, unprecedented, and escalating. The number of individuals killed, injured, and displaced without protection continues to grow, while access for humanitarian actors is increasingly restricted. It is imperative that no time is wasted in strengthening the capacity of those on the front lines of the humanitarian response, enabling them to resume and expand their work with the agility and flexibility that the current uncertainty demands.

Among the numerous competing priorities for response, the urgent need to support women's rights organisations (WRO) and women-led organisations (WLO) in Gaza is paramount. Prior to October, 2023, these organisations were at the forefront of gender-based violence (GBV) prevention interventions and the provision of GBV response services. Their role has become even more critical as the Israel's war on Gaza deepens.

Within this environment of desperation, risks of gender-based violence (GBV), particularly against women and adolescent girls, but also of men and boys, have increased significantly. GBV is persistent across all societies, with many studies showing that conflict and displacement exacerbate rates of all forms of GBV¹. In Palestine, rates of GBV were already disproportionately high before the current crisis². The impact of the current escalation of Israel's war has meant an exacerbation of the conditions that have contributed to GBV risks including forced displacement, overcrowdedness, lack of privacy in formal and non-formal shelters, increased poverty, fragmentation of families and social protection measures and incomprehensible levels of fear, loss and mental trauma resulting in reduced capacities to manage feelings of anger. Risks of GBV are also linked to the increased presence of armed actors throughout the Gaza Strip.



Access to GBV response services is extremely limited and is now becoming more challenging in light of the forced displacement orders in Rafah leading to the collapse of the existing limited services. There is almost no capacity or space for comprehensive case management, psychosocial support/counselling, medical care, or safe sheltering to respond to the majority of GBV cases coupled with a collapse of policing and judicial systems to report incidents³. Many young girls have been orphaned, leaving them extremely vulnerable if they have no surviving extended family; others including widows, women and girls with a disability, and those separated from family members or having to take on caring roles for their family are acutely vulnerable to all forms of GBV. To date, members of the GBV AoR have received increased reports on all types of GBV including intimate partner violence, sexual violence.

¹ [Addressing Gender Inequalities in Countries Affected by Fragility, Conflict, and Violence](#)

² [Gender-based violence in Palestine](#)

³ [Gaza Crisis: Gender Based Violence Concerns and Priorities - Information & Advocacy Note: 20 October 2023](#)

What are WROs and WLOs?⁴

A women's rights organisation is:

(a) an organisation that self-identifies as a woman's rights organisation with the primary focus of advancing gender equality, women's empowerment and human rights; or (b) an organisation that has, as part of its mission statement, the advancement of women's and girls' interests and rights (or where "women", "girls", "gender" or local language equivalents are prominent in their mission statement); or (c) an organisation that has, as part of its mission statement

or objectives, to challenge and transform gender inequalities (unjust rules), unequal power relations and to promote positive social norms.

A women-led organisation is an organisation with a humanitarian mandate and/or mission that is: (a) governed or directed by women; or (b) whose leadership is principally made up of women, demonstrated by 50 per cent or more occupying senior leadership positions.

Why Women-Led Organisations are Essential for GBV Prevention, Risk Mitigation and Response in Gaza

1. Experience and Expertise: WLOs have direct experience and a deep understanding of the unique challenges that women and girls face. Their lived experiences and professional expertise equip them to design and implement effective interventions tailored to the specific needs of survivors.

2. Community Trust and Reach: These organisations have established trust within their communities. Survivors of GBV are more likely to seek help from and confide in organisations that they trust and feel understood by. WLOs can leverage their community connections to reach and support more survivors.

3. Empowerment and Representation: Supporting WLOs promotes gender equality and empowerment. It ensures that women have a voice and are represented in decision-making processes related to GBV. This is critical for developing policies and programs that genuinely address the needs of women and girls.

4. Holistic and Survivor-Centered Approaches: WLOs in Gaza already have at their core a holistic and survivor-centred approach to GBV work. They understand the criticality of the GBV guiding principles of confidentiality, safety and respect for the choices, rights and dignity of women and girls.

5. Advocacy and Policy Change: These organisations are often at the forefront of advocacy efforts to change policies and societal norms that perpetuate GBV. Their insights and experiences are invaluable in shaping effective legislation and creating an environment that does not tolerate violence against women and girls.

6. Intersectionality: WLOs are more likely to recognize and address the intersectional nature of GBV, understanding how race, class, disability, and other factors intersect with gender to exacerbate violence and discrimination. This nuanced approach is crucial for reaching and supporting the most marginalised and vulnerable survivors.

7. Capacity Building and Sustainability: Investing in WLOs helps build local capacity and ensures the sustainability of GBV interventions. It fosters leadership and organisational development within the community, creating a robust support system that can continue to address GBV in the long term.

8. Innovative Solutions: WLOs are often innovative, developing unique and context-specific solutions to combat GBV. Their close connection to the communities they serve enables them to identify gaps and respond with creative, effective strategies.

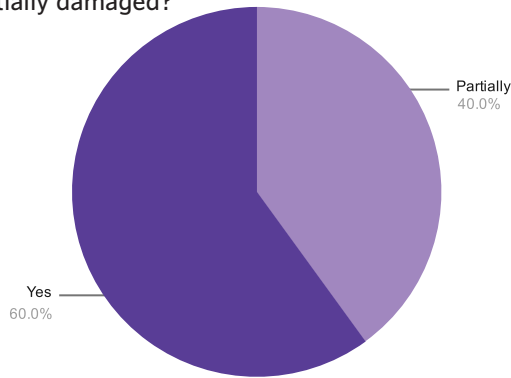
⁴GBV Area of Responsibility

The Impact of the Conflict on Provision of GBV Response Services by WLOs in the Gaza Strip

The ongoing conflict in Gaza has had a profound and multifaceted impact on the provision of GBV services, especially those provided by WLOs. Following a survey of GBV Area of Responsibility (AoR) Sub Cluster members in the Gaza Strip the following findings were captured:

1. Operational Challenges: WLOs have faced significant operational disruptions due to the conflict. 60 per cent of surveyed GBV AoR Members reported total destruction of their offices; 40 per cent reported partial damage. 100 per cent have lost essential equipment including computers, phones and case files. Movement restrictions and safety concerns limit the ability of staff to conduct fieldwork and reach vulnerable populations.

Has the institution's building been completely or partially damaged?

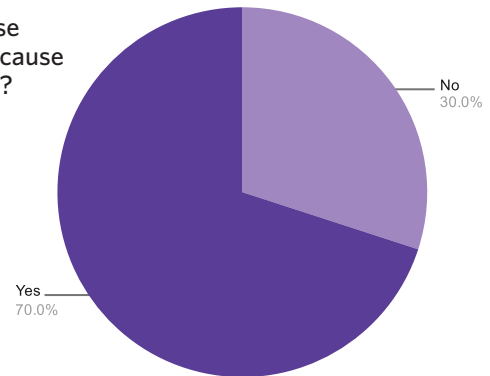


2. Increased Demand for GBV Response Services: The war has exacerbated pre-existing levels of GBV. Issues such as poverty, conflict within families, negative coping mechanisms and displacement have all resulted in an increase in GBV including intimate partner violence, emotional violence and sexual violence. This has meant frontline GBV response providers, who have themselves been significantly impacted by the war including multiple displacements and loss of or fear of losing loved ones, are having an increased number of survivors and those at risk of GBV seeking them out for support. This has impacted their own mental health and capacity to deliver services, which often involves taking on the trauma of a GBV survivor.

3. Funding Constraints: Funding has also hampered the ability of members to restart and/or expand GBV response services. 70 per cent of those surveyed reported a loss of funding due to the conflict, either due to the donor withdrawing committed funds, or to accounts being frozen.

This has resulted in staff from some organisations accepting employment offers from other organisations not all of which are GBV focused. This means a further loss of trained and experienced GBV actors.

Did you lose funding because of this war?



4. Staffing: Whilst all members reported having highly experienced and well trained GBV response providers in place prior to October 2023, 100 per cent reported having reduced staffing levels. 50 GBV response actors are known to have been killed; 98 are known to have been wounded; and 118 are recorded as having left Gaza. These numbers are likely to be much higher. All organisations surveyed reported staff being displaced multiple times, resulting in frequent loss of contact with staff as they move themselves and their families from one location to another, searching for temporary shelter and safety.

50
Killed

98
Wounded

118
Left Gaza

5. Security Concerns: WLOs and their staff have faced heightened security risks throughout the Gaza Strip. Targeted attacks, harassment, and general insecurity against humanitarian workers and their lack of having Armored Vehicles (ARVs), Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) etc. has prevented many from being able to carry out their work safely and effectively. GBV response providers reported feeling uneasy in supporting survivors of intimate partner violence for instance in overcrowded shelter sites, where privacy for such discussions remains almost impossible. Others reported knowing of GBV cases but were not able to assist as they could not travel to the location of the survivor due to active conflict and presence of armed actors.

Despite these challenges, WLOs continue to demonstrate remarkable resilience. All have found ways to adapt their programs, develop innovative solutions, and continue to provide as best they can, critical support to their communities. Humanitarian donors are strongly urged to increase resources directly supporting women and youth-led organisations and to enhance engagement with WLOs. The staff of WROs and WLOs tirelessly work to provide essential GBV prevention and response services to a population in dire need.

The Palestine GBV Sub-Cluster offers the following analysis and recommendations for why and how to ensure WLOs and WROs are at the core of GBV response in the Gaza Strip:

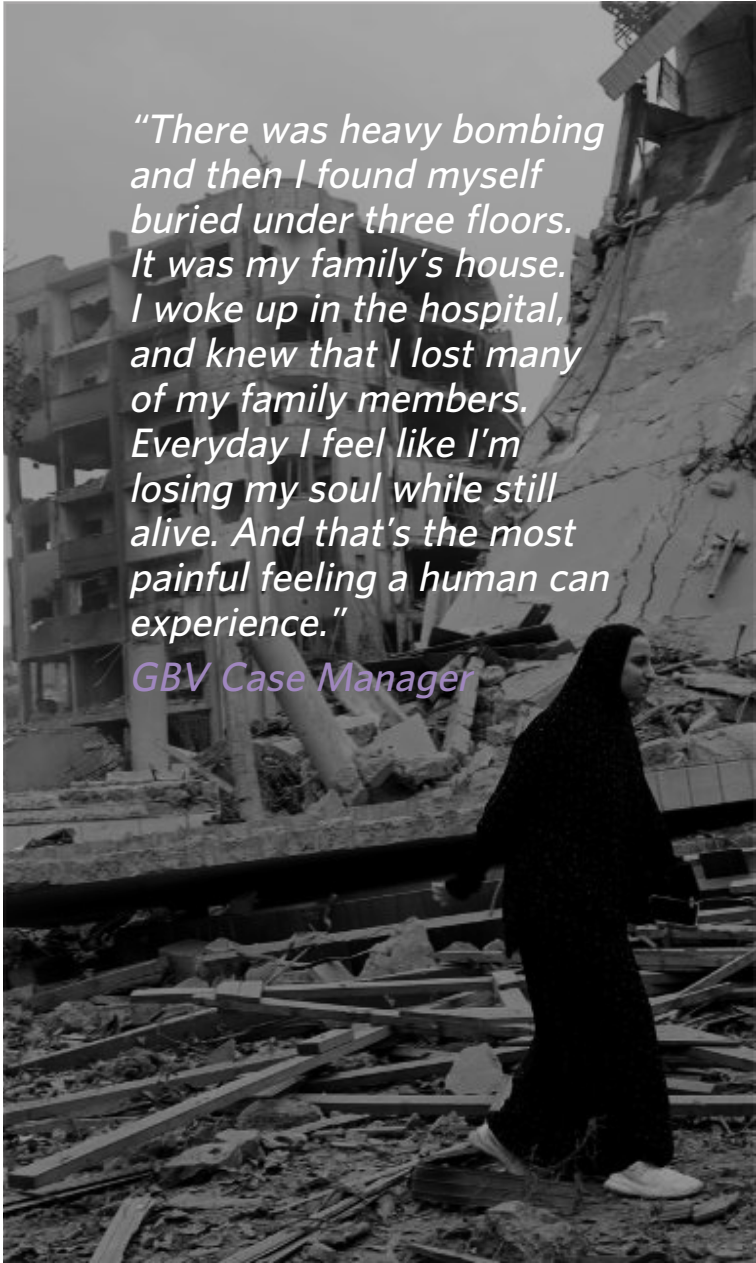
1. GBV prevention and response services require dedicated and targeted support to WROs/WLOs with unique access to those furthest behind

Prior to October, civil society organisations (CSOs) including local WROs / WLOs formed the backbone of the GBV sub-cluster in the Gaza Strip representing 20 of its 31 members. While the GBV Sub-Cluster in Gaza was able to regroup in January 2024 the capacity of WROs / WLOs has been decimated as too has the years of progress they have made with and through the GBV sub-cluster in strengthening the capacity of police, judiciary, and social workers to respond and support survivors of GBV appropriately.

The continuous displacement in Gaza significantly impacts WLO/WROs exacerbating their operational challenges and straining their resources. These organisations are crucial in providing emergency assistance, support services, and advocacy for women's rights. However, the protracted and continuous displacement crisis from one area to another has multiple detrimental effects on their capacity and effectiveness.


Significant investment is now required to support local WRO / WLO organisations to regroup, rebuild, and scale up their critical work. Given the level of destruction and loss, it is likely that new organisations and leadership will also emerge during this crisis.

These too must be supported in adding value and capacity to a civil society too long under siege recognising both the unique and disproportionate impact of armed conflict on women and girls and the vital role that only local WRO / WLOs can play in reaching those furthest behind in this context. It is critical to acknowledge that these gaps cannot be filled solely by the international community. The human resources do not currently exist to meet the sheer volume of GBV cases in need of response services, which will continue to increase the longer the crisis continues. To sustainably support the people of Gaza moving forward, support for leadership in humanitarian action by a strong, local civil society community is vital. It is a concern however that despite commitments by many donors to support gender-responsive humanitarian action, just 0.09 per cent of funding to the 2023 Flash Appeal has directly gone to national or local women's rights organisations.



"There was heavy bombing and then I found myself buried under three floors. It was my family's house. I woke up in the hospital, and knew that I lost many of my family members. Everyday I feel like I'm losing my soul while still alive. And that's the most painful feeling a human can experience."

GBV Case Manager



“We have lost everything. Our office space and equipment, our records. We used to have many women come to us asking for help, but now we are lost. We have tried to set up a temporary space for women who need our help to come to us, but the rent we are being charged is exorbitant. We cannot afford this for much longer. We cannot even set up our office space in the way we know we need to, so that women feel comfortable telling us what they are experiencing. There is no privacy”
GBV Sub-Cluster member, Gaza

WROs / WLOs possess a deep understanding of the context including social norms and have established trust within their communities, allowing them to effectively reach the most vulnerable populations. Empowering these organisations ensures a more inclusive and comprehensive humanitarian response that addresses the specific needs of women and girls, who are increasingly bearing a disproportionate burden due to the conflict.

Moreover, enhancing the capacity of WLOs contributes to long-term resilience and recovery. These organisations play a pivotal role in advocating for women’s rights and gender equality, which are crucial for sustainable peace and development. They also foster community cohesion and provide critical services that mitigate the impact of the crisis on women and their families.

Local WRO/WLOs, existing and new, of diverse size and purpose, are integral in this regard to provide the services that match the stated needs of women and girls of Gaza - both in the short and long term. This will mean the re-establishment of a multisectoral comprehensive GBV services, interventions, and ways of working, including maternal health, pre and postnatal care, GBV referral pathway, GBV case management (especially for complex cases), integrated GBV/Sexual Reproductive Health (SRH) services, and Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA). Strengthen the capacity of service providers by training new and existing GBV responders such as medical personnel, police, and the judicial system, mental health, and psychosocial support and more.

Funding sources however must be in place. This means not only flexible, predictable, and multi-year, but also timely, adequate, and accessible.

Donors must also take into consideration the inequitable barriers to financial resources that many WRO / WLOs experience, particularly those with limited capacity to manage high administrative requirements and the need for a fair contribution to core operational costs and need for capacity strengthening.

2. In order to build back and deliver services, WROs/WLOs must have equitable access to flexible funding

Immediately after October, multiple local NGOs in Gaza began to receive notifications that funding for their work had been frozen or that future transfers of funding would not be forthcoming. This was due to the perception that some local organisations are unable to effectively manage risks. This perception is indicative of the stigmatisation of Palestinian civil society and the effect of measures which lead donors, INGOs, and the commercial sector including financial institutions to de-risk.

Additional layers of accountability have been demanded of funding partners including impossible contractual obligations. The consequence of these measures, is a denial of equitable access to funding by local WRO/WLOs, in effect, adding to existing layers of discrimination and marginalisation. Furthermore, these measures fail to recognise established mechanisms by local WRO / WLOs as well as their funding partners to effectively manage risks despite often ineligibility of donor funding to support capacity strengthening. Support in this regard, recognising the level of shock to institutional capacity of many local WRO / WLOs, as well as demands on newly formed CSOs, is now critical.

“Our grant was frozen. We couldn’t access the funds. It took us a few weeks to be able to ask for permission to change the planned activities to respond to the crisis. We were told no by the donor. I do not understand why they wouldn’t give us permission for this”, GBV Sub Cluster member, Gaza



Recommendations to donors and International Partners:

- **Speak directly and regularly to WROs/WLOs** so as to ensure a direct understanding of their needs, challenges, and solutions for overcoming bureaucratic, access, and funding impediments. WRO/WLO staff continue to do the best they can in maintaining the provision of GBV response services, within an extremely challenging environment, when they themselves are directly impacted by the war.
- Include specifically in advocacy efforts the **criticality of WROs / WLOs having full access to deliver life-saving services**, including for survivors and those at risk of GBV.
- **Significantly scale up funding, based on equitable partnership and risk sharing, that can reach WROs/WLOs** now in order to strengthen capacity to meet current and future needs acknowledging their unique capacity, acceptance of local communities and agency in reaching those furthest behind. This includes establishing dedicated funds, including pooled funds, earmarked for WROs/WLOs.
- **Monitor the level of humanitarian financing accessible to and reaching WRO / WLOs** and adapt eligibility requirements (accessibility) where corrective action is required.
- **Prioritise the mental health and wellbeing of GBV frontline response providers.** Provide regular and qualified opportunities to GBV staff, particularly those providing case management and psychosocial support, helping them to develop skills in personal resilience and trauma healing.
- **Advocate with political leadership and authorities of member states** to reach out and engage as a matter of urgency with the corporate sector, financial institutions and humanitarian actors to provide clear and unambiguous guidance on permissible financial transfers underlining that de-risking costs lives and represents a barrier to humanitarian access.

For more information, please reach out to the GBV Sub-Cluster in Palestine:

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