



The Blind Spot

Women-Focused Organizations: Analyzing the Earthquake's Impact and the Response to Affected Women

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Introduction:

On February 6th, a devastating twin-earthquake hit southern Turkey and northern Syria. According to the Syrian Network of Human Rights (SNHR), a little over ten thousand Syrians have lost their lives in both Syria and Turkey as a result of the earthquake and the deficiency of aid, with a third of them being women and children.¹ A report released by the UNOCHA lists over ten thousand people as injured in NWS, with 43% of them being women and girls, according to data from the Health Cluster.² Meanwhile, the Ministry of Health affiliated with the Government of Syria (GoS) referred to more than 2000 injured individuals in GoS-controlled affected areas.³ However, no disaggregation on sex is available for those figures.

Moreover, the earthquakes have resulted in the displacement of tens of thousands, the majority of whom have lived through multiple displacements.⁴

The devastating earthquakes have placed increased pressure on NGOs and CSOs, which already bear the major responsibility for responding to people's needs. The complex conflict and aid delivery system raise questions about the level and quality of response to women affected by the earthquake disaster. It is worth considering that many of these organizations, along with their operations and staff, have themselves been directly affected by the earthquake.

This paper aims to examine the impact of the earthquake on women-focused organizations (WFOs), including feminist organizations, women-led organizations, women's rights organizations, and organizations providing services to women in different areas of Syria. The paper also aims to understand the type and nature of response provided to the affected women.

Produced within the framework of the project "Fostering Women-led Spaces for Change," this paper relies on information provided by nine partner WFOs, along with four additional interviews involving individuals who were actively involved in the earthquake response.

WFOs Amidst Disaster

Impact on WFOs can be observed on multiple interconnected levels. The most immediate and evident aspect is the physical damage suffered by both staff and properties of the organizations operating in the earthquake-hit areas. Testimonies from various WFOs reveal the devastating toll, with reports of damaged premises, equipment, and loss of staff members or their family members. For instance, one member of a WFO in Idlib shared, "Our center's manager and several other team members had to relocate due to damage to their houses and

¹ SNHR, Earthquake casualties updates 28 March 2023, in Arabic, <https://rb.gy/s2hze>

² UN OCHA, North west Syria in the aftermath of the earthquake, latest update 21 July 2023, <https://rb.gy/arlle>

³ Syrian Arab News Agency, 14 Feb 2023, in Arabic, <https://rb.gy/7ij11>

⁴ No place but displacement, Action for Humanity, accessed through Reliefweb, 16 Mar 2023, <https://rb.gy/322k2>

loss of belongings... one colleague lost her husband and three children, and she stayed 10 hours under the rubble of her own house."

The impact extends beyond loss of lives, as residential buildings were damaged, leading to panic and chaos and leaving staff members and their families displaced and scattered, especially in the initial days following the disaster. However, specific data and statistics on the number of casualties among civil society and humanitarian workers, as well as the extent of material damages, remain unavailable.

The damage inflicted upon WFOs as a result of the earthquake extends beyond direct physical harm, encompassing significant psychological impacts arising from the trauma, uncertainty, and overwhelming responsibility to address the needs of others. Lubna Alkanawati, the deputy director of Women Now for Development (WND), pointed out during an interview that WFOs in North West Syria (NWS) found themselves compelled to respond to those most affected without sufficient time to recover and attend to their own needs.

Furthermore, the earthquake's impact is not confined to the geographical scope of the disaster. WFOs based in other areas, while spared from the physical toll, experienced psychological repercussions among their staff, with many expressing shock, trauma, and concern for relatives and friends in affected regions.

Additionally, WFOs in non-affected areas displayed strong solidarity with those impacted by the disaster, actively participating in the response to varying degrees. Their involvement primarily focused on coordination and the collection of financial and material donations, as well as providing small-scale psychosocial support (PSS) activities.

The responsibility of responding to the affected population has not only affected the well-being of WFO staff and volunteers but has also influenced operational and programmatic strategies and priorities, both in the short and long terms.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, WFOs in affected areas not only experienced suspension or delay of planned activities and projects in the short term but were also compelled to reassess their operating methods and reallocate funds to address more pressing needs. In an interview with Hasna'a Barakat from the Syrian Feminist Society, she shared an example of these shifts, stating, "At the beginning, we all got involved in emergency response, completely abandoning our original projects and goals... We diverted funds from an advocacy project to focus on emergency humanitarian response." Moreover, the earthquake prompted them to recognize the neglect of their own well-being, leading to discussions with a donor to initiate a new project aimed at establishing a safe space and PSS program for women actively involved in humanitarian and civic work. Similar examples were given by an anonymous expert from Aleppo city, who highlighted an increase in activities related to psychosocial support (PSS) and mental health in the months following the earthquake.

However, these operational and strategic shifts did not occur without challenges. The multi-layered response undertaken by WFOs, including emergency support for their staff, partners,

and the affected population, created administrative and operational hurdles, further exacerbated by external factors. Lubna Alkanawati from WND mentioned in a May 2023 interview that the earthquake left their Turkey-based team paralyzed, leading to their Europe-based team, which was not usually involved in daily field operations, taking on additional responsibilities. As a consequence, project timelines and roles became mixed up, and three months later, they were still working on restoring their administrative systems.

Money transfer difficulties, already complicated in the Syrian context,⁵ posed a significant obstacle to a fast and effective response, especially for the very few WFOs that had access to contingency or reallocated funds. However, for most WFOs, particularly small-sized grassroots initiatives, the most significant challenges stemmed from the scarcity of resources and the lack of flexibility exhibited by donors and partner INGOs. One interviewee shared a story of a donor demanding financial reports and refusing to grant a deadline extension only days after the earthquake, despite their offices and computers being destroyed. Another interviewee mentioned available equipment and supplies that couldn't be deployed without navigating through a long chain of permissions and paperwork with the donor INGO.

Securing routes and methods for transferring and delivering collected donations was also a challenge reported by WFOs from non-affected areas. For instance, several interviewees from northeast Syria (NES) mentioned contributing to the aid convoy heading to NWS but highlighted the difficulties faced by the convoy in securing transportation and crossing checkpoints between the two areas of control, which served as a major hurdle to an effective response.⁶

While many of these effects and challenges are not exclusive to WFOs and can be observed among a wider range of civil society actors, their significance becomes more evident when examining the response to affected women and the levels of gender-sensitivity in this response.

Supporting Affected Women

Available information on the response to women affected by the earthquakes, along with input from interviewed organizations, paints a bleak picture. Interviewees and partner WFOs cited various examples of how the response lacked appropriate gender considerations for equitable and effective aid. Notably, widespread reports of human rights violations and gender-based violence, particularly in collective temporary shelters, underscore the increased risk of gender-based violence (GBV). This heightened risk, as assessed by multiple UN agencies and organizations, is worsened by a gender-blind response and disregard for recommendations to enhance protection. In March 2023, UNFPA issued an assessment brief on GBV risk after the earthquake, providing actionable recommendations for all humanitarian

⁵ For more info please refer to Invisible sanctions, IMPACT, 2020, <https://impactres.org/invisible-sanctions/>

⁶ For more info on the aid convoy please refer to: <https://shorturl.at/pCVW4> or <https://shorturl.at/kuDO2>, in Arabic

actors.⁷ However, available reports, documentations, and input from WFOs and women activists suggest that these recommendations were rarely implemented, resulting in insufficient mitigation of GBV risks.

For instance, UNFPA recommends conducting GBV risk analysis as part of shelter/NFI assistance and coordinating with WASH sectors to ensure lighting and other measures are in place to reduce GBV risk. However, many reports have surfaced on the lack or even absence of those measures; input from our interviews also corroborates these findings. For example, tents made of almost transparent materials were distributed in various areas in NWS, depriving people of privacy and protection. These tents were mostly without insulation or any protection from the freezing temperatures and harsh winter weather at the time. Additionally, many of the collective ad-hoc shelters and camps lacked lighting or gender-segregated latrines, creating a dangerous situation, especially for women and children.

In Aleppo city and other locations in GoS areas, many of the collective shelters were either in school buildings lacking electricity, heating, or sufficient latrines, or in mosques where, according to Islamic norms and religious beliefs, menstruating women are denied entry.

The ability to report on GBV incidents or seek protection support is hampered by sometimes poorly designed mechanisms. One interviewee mentioned a male PSEA (Protection from sexual exploitation and abuse) point of contact in one area in NWS, wondering how any woman would feel comfortable reporting a sexual harassment incident to a male focal point. The same interviewee also indicated the complexity and lack of clarity in many referral and reporting pathways, including communication channels that don't consider the digital illiteracy of many affected women.

The lack of gender-sensitive response for affected women after the earthquake is clearly evident from many other cases and examples documented and shared by women activists and WFOs. This lack of sensitivity is also attributed to several factors and structural root causes within society and within the aid industry itself.

The chaos resulting from the unpredictability of the disaster, the long-term impact of the protracted conflict, and the politicization of aid are all factors that contributed to an overall unsatisfactory response to populations affected by the earthquake. However, when it comes to the response to affected women, the most prominent and influential factor is the lack of women's involvement and active participation in the decision-making, design, and delivery processes of aid. As one interviewee put it, "The majority of executives in organizations are men, they write and submit the proposals, it is not necessarily bad intentions, but they don't really know women's needs... So how can we expect gender-sensitive programming?"

Societal and prevailing patriarchal norms present a unique set of challenges for women involved in the response. A member of the Syrian Civil Defense (White Helmets), responsible

⁷ UNFP, An overview of gender-based violence risks in the 2023 Syria earthquake response, 16 Mar 2023, <https://rb.gy/wd8st>

for leading search and rescue efforts in Northwestern Syria, highlighted the major challenge of social rejection faced by women in civil defense teams. Society often considers such work to be exclusively for men. Despite this bias, the White Helmets has incorporated around 300 female volunteers who participate to varying extents in search and rescue efforts, first aid, trauma counseling, and follow-up medical services. These women undergo rigorous training and are well-equipped “to handle affected women while understanding their specific healthcare needs”.

Moreover, the lack of coordination between the various actors has led to sporadic non-comprehensive need assessments and subsequently patchy response. One interviewee noted that the earthquake response lacks clarity and connection to wider humanitarian and early recovery efforts, which was also corroborated by another who criticized the short-term nature of the activities and the scarcity of sustainable projects that address issues of housing and access to services, especially health services. Both of them emphasized the disproportionate impact on women in such settings.

Conclusion

The paper has provided a general overview of the multi-layered effect of the earthquake on WFOs responding to women's needs. It aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge about Syrian women.

While a comprehensive in-depth assessment of the earthquake's impact is still needed, it is increasingly evident that a natural disaster of this magnitude has exposed structural problems in the aid industry and the overall response to the Syrian crisis, especially concerning women's needs in a socially and politically challenging context. A critical review of assessment methods, aid program design and delivery, and the effectiveness and applicability of recommendations and proposed solutions is of paramount importance. More importantly, efforts must be mobilized to increase women's level and quality of participation in all stages of aid delivery, as it is the only pathway to ensure an improved, equitable, and dignified response.

On another note, the earthquake has highlighted the case of feminist solidarity, evident from testimonies, messages, and efforts by women activists and organizations from areas not affected by the earthquake. This case presents opportunities for cross-conflict line solidarity and collaboration, particularly between WFOs and women activists.