

Feminist Humanitarian Response in Myanmar/Burma Beyond Aid: How Feminist Networks Reached Myanmar's Most Marginalized After the 2025 Earthquake

Executive Summary: Funding Mechanisms, Reach & Feminist Practice

1. Funding Mechanisms: Sources & Approaches

The organisations documented in this report drew on six distinct funding approaches, ranging from international feminist grants to community-level fundraising. These mechanisms differed sharply from traditional humanitarian funding in their speed, flexibility, and accessibility.

Six Funding Pathways

- Direct grants from feminist funds — principally Women's Fund Asia (WFA) and Urgent Action Fund (UAF) — provided rapid, minimal-compliance transfers based on trust built through multi-year relationships, replacing receipt requirements with narrative accountability.
- Sub-grants via intermediary organisations — feminist umbrella networks absorbed proposal-writing, donor negotiations, and reporting obligations entirely, allowing small partners to focus on implementation rather than administration.
- Emergency alumni funds — pre-positioned grant mechanisms activated within days of the earthquake, with criteria deliberately minimal and financial reporting waived.
- Crowdfunding and public fundraising — one intermediary seeded its response with its own funds (10,000 THB), supplemented by diaspora donations, publishing all income and expenditure publicly in lieu of formal grant management.
- Pre-financing from core and reserve funds — several organisations used existing reserves to begin response immediately, later seeking retroactive reimbursement from flexible funders willing to accept this approach.
- Ethnic and revolutionary organizations — in some areas, emergency financing was provided through ethnic organizations and revolutionary groups, bypassing lengthy international donor processes entirely.

Key Contrast with Traditional Humanitarian Funding

Traditional donors apply compliance-based accountability — registration requirements, receipts, audit trails, and multi-stage approvals — that are structurally inaccessible to unregistered grassroots groups. Feminist funds replaced these with trust-based partnerships, upfront disbursement (often in a single tranche),

locally-led programme design, and proactive outreach rather than competitive applications. WFA contacted a feminist intermediary to ask what it was already doing and offered to fund that work — inverting the standard power relationship entirely.

*“UAF approached us. We did not approach them.
We just posted online saying we were organising.”*

2. Challenges in Defining 'Feminist Organisations'

A recurring tension in the report concerns who qualifies as a feminist organisation — and therefore who can access feminist funding streams. This definitional ambiguity creates real operational barriers.

- There is no shared understanding of what a 'feminist fund' is or who is eligible. Some organisations — including queer groups and those aligned with UN gender definitions — reported being unable to access funding even when they applied, creating confusion about the criteria in use.
- Feminist funds tend to be known only within a limited network: several organisations interviewed had never heard of UAF or WFA, and therefore could not access them at all.
- Some donors prioritise well-known organisations with stronger lobbying capacity, while grassroots groups — often the most feminist in practice — remain under-connected and underfunded.
- The report suggests that feminist funds need to more consistently apply their stated principles in practice, and engage in active outreach to women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and grassroots feminist groups who fall outside existing networks.
- Another dimension of this challenge: the organisations themselves range widely — from formally constituted women's networks to volunteer-led mutual aid collectives, queer rights groups, and sex worker peer networks — all operating on feminist principles but often not recognised as such by formal funding systems.

*"Some feminist funds also do not provide timely early response support.
In some cases, funding is only disbursed three months after an appeal."*

3. Examples: How Flexibility of Feminist Funding Made a Difference

Feminist funding enabled responses that traditional humanitarian mechanisms structurally could not. The following examples illustrate where flexibility was decisive.

Cash as a Safer Modality

In a conflict zone with active SAC military checkpoints, transporting physical goods carried significant risk of confiscation — menstrual pads were seized at one checkpoint, assumed to be supplies for resistance forces. Feminist funders accepted cash as the primary modality. Cash could be concealed during transport and was used by communities to meet their own priorities, including items absent from standard aid packages.

*"Transporting goods carries very high risk at checkpoints.
Cash we can conceal and carry more easily."*

Waiving Documentation in Crisis Conditions

Standard humanitarian accountability requires beneficiary signatures, receipts, and photographs — practices that became dangerous in conflict-affected areas where signing documents exposed people to junta targeting. WFA accepted narrative updates and waived receipt requirements entirely after a feminist intermediary made the case directly. This was not possible under any traditional donor framework in operation at the time.

*"Being asked to take photos and collect evidence felt like compromising human dignity.
Someone whose home just collapsed may not even remember their phone number."*

Funding Queer Communities Excluded from Mainstream Aid

When UAF was approached to document the exclusion of queer community members — turned away from monastery shelters and discriminated against by mainstream aid volunteers — UAF expanded its mandate beyond its original scope and provided a direct lump-sum grant paid into personal accounts. No registration was required and no formal application cycle was used. This was the only mechanism through which these 200 individuals received any support.

Pre-financing and Retroactive Approval

One organisation drew approximately 40 million kyat from its own reserves and reached Sagaing and Mandalay within days of the earthquake, before any external funding had been contracted. Feminist funders were willing to accept retroactive justification and reimburse these pre-financed costs — a modality no traditional donor would accommodate. By the time formal grants from traditional mechanisms arrived (two to four months later), this organisation's entire emergency response had already been completed.

4. Reach: Underserved Communities vs. Traditional Humanitarian Mechanisms

The organisations collectively reached an estimated 125,000 or more individuals across Mandalay, Sagaing, Shan State, Karenni State, and other earthquake-affected areas — including populations in both

military controlled and resistance-held territory. Their reach consistently extended to groups that traditional humanitarian mechanisms systematically failed to serve.

Populations Reached by Feminist Organisations

- Sex workers and people living with HIV — excluded from mainstream aid because they lacked the household registration documents or government-issued ID that most programmes required as proof of eligibility, and because they faced active discrimination from mainstream aid volunteers.
- LGBTQI+ and gender-diverse communities — turned away from monastery evacuation shelters and excluded from mainstream distributions; reached only through feminist queer-led peer networks.
- Persons with disabilities — one organisation distributed 2,000 assistive devices (wheelchairs, crutches, walking sticks) after community consultation redirected resources from standard hygiene kits to mobility aids.
- Women in conflict-affected and hard-to-reach areas — including resistance-held zones in Sagaing and Shan State where international humanitarian actors could not operate due to access restrictions and insecurity.
- Women-headed households, elderly people, ethnic minority communities, and displaced people without ID — excluded from official registration-based distributions.

Why Traditional Mechanisms Could Not Reach These Groups

Large international humanitarian actors — including UN agencies and international NGOs — operated primarily through formal institutional channels requiring prior registration, household counts, procurement documentation, and multi-stage approval. Access restrictions imposed by the SAC military further limited their reach in contested areas. Several organisations noted that some affected areas had never previously received support from any external donor, and that women in these communities 'felt completely lost with no way forward' before feminist responders arrived.

*"When we gave, some donors only came to the front streets and left.
Our women were outside the city — some had no ID, some had no
household registration — so they couldn't access mainstream aid."*

*"When humanitarian groups distribute funding, we are never on the list.
The people who distribute the funds never want to give it to sex workers.
If we do not work through our own peer networks, we will never receive funding."*

Structural Advantage of Feminist Organisations

Feminist and women-led organisations were able to reach these communities for structural reasons: they originally emerged to advocate for and support marginalised groups, and therefore already had established

trust and connections with them. They operated through collective, decentralised leadership with focal points at village and township level. They conducted consultations before implementation, with direct participation of beneficiaries, enabling accurate identification of actual needs. And they possessed deep contextual knowledge of the safest and most feasible ways to deliver support in a politically dangerous environment — advantages that no externally designed humanitarian programme could replicate.