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WHEN WE MOVE TOGETHER, WE MOVE THE WORLD

Unfolding the Tapestry

**WEAVING THEMES AND STRATEGIES
OF FEMINIST CRISIS RESPONSE**

FEBRUARY 2024

Unfolding the Tapestry: Weaving Themes and Strategies of Feminist Crisis Response

Beginning, threading, setting out on the path

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Thoughts on the Title

We invite you to consider the title as an image that will guide your reading of the document. Like a rich, colorful tapestry, its threads mirror the diverse voices, experiences, and strategies of feminists as they navigate the intricate landscape of crisis response. Each thread bears the weight of numerous stories, strategies, and knowledge. We have crafted this document with the intention of seamlessly weaving these threads into an already vibrant tapestry, recognizing that this research adds to and enriches the existing body of knowledge.

Design of the Report

The design of this report is compliant with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) and the Accessible Canada Act.

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Table of Contents | 4 |
| Setting the Stage | 6 |
| Unpacking Crises: A Feminist Perspective | 8 |
| Structural..... | 9 |
| Compounded..... | 10 |
| Political and Critical..... | 11 |
| Beyond Humanitarian Definitions..... | 11 |
| Who are Feminist Responders | 12 |
| A Portrait of A Feminist Grassroots Responder..... | 13 |
| Weaving Threads of Feminist Response to Crises | 15 |
| Intersectional..... | 15 |
| Community Centric..... | 16 |
| Visionary and Long Term..... | 17 |
| Care-Centred..... | 18 |
| Weaving Strategies of Feminist Crises Response | 19 |
| Holistic Needs..... | 20 |
| Rapid Response..... | 21 |
| Relief and Evacuation..... | 23 |
| Safe Spaces..... | 24 |
| Mobilizing Solidarity..... | 26 |
| Alternative Community Hubs..... | 27 |
| Research and Community Diagnosis..... | 28 |
| Political Visioning and Long-Term Strategizing..... | 30 |
| Fostering Feminist Response to Crises: The Role of Feminist Funds | 31 |
| Catalyzing Models in Crisis Work..... | 32 |
| Politicizing Resources:..... | 32 |
| Responsive Funding:..... | 33 |
| Preparedness:..... | 33 |
| Channeling Resources to Feminist Grassroots Movements..... | 35 |
| Emergency Livelihoods and Relocation:..... | 36 |
| Care and Healing Work:..... | 36 |

Equality fund

WHEN WE MOVE TOGETHER, WE MOVE THE WORLD

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Advocacy and Campaigns:..... | 37 |
| Skills and Capacity:..... | 37 |
| Movement-Building Work..... | 37 |
| Learning, Knowledge and Documentation:..... | 37 |
| Constructing the Infrastructure..... | 38 |
| Increasing Resources..... | 38 |
| Preparedness and Alertness..... | 39 |
| Philanthropic Advocacy..... | 41 |
| Coordination Within the Feminist Funding Ecosystem..... | 41 |
| Documentation and Learning..... | 42 |
| Navigating Crises: Concluding Thoughts..... | 43 |

Setting the Stage

This report serves as foundational research for the Equality Fund's new grantmaking stream, "Prepare, Respond and Care" and is a summary of a longer research document. It unveils the rich tapestry of feminist crisis response based on the experiences and histories of activists and movements operating at the intersections of climate and environment, civic space, human rights, democracy, LGBTQI+ and women's rights, and Indigenous peoples. Its aim is to enrich the collective production of knowledge to honour and remember, discover new meanings, and mobilize change in the present and future.

It takes as a starting point the observation that despite the consistent presence of feminist activists, organizations, and movements at the forefront of crisis response, especially in contexts where they are disproportionately affected, research focusing on amplifying feminist voices from the Global South has been limited. We focus this research on feminist crisis responses led by feminist activists and movements on the ground.¹

Over a period of six months, we embarked on a journey to map the rich philosophies, strategies and approaches that make up what we call a *feminist crises response*. The focus is to weave together the body of work around feminist crisis response: the weaving, the strategies devised and deployed by grassroots feminists, and models of crisis response by feminist funds. This report examines how political and socioeconomic landscapes have influenced, transformed, or questioned existing practices and paradigms in crisis response.

We address this in three arcs:

1. Conceptual definitions and intervention models;
2. Themes in feminist organizing strategies; and
3. Actors in the crisis response ecosystem.

¹ We recognize that feminists are found in various sectors, including within the mainstream humanitarian response framework. Our study focused on the views of individuals who are feminist activists or part of feminist movements. Consequently, this research does not encompass the viewpoints of feminists employed in government, United Nations, or INGO humanitarian response organizations.

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Around these arcs, the qualitative methodology was designed to uphold key feminist principles² that became the basis for the interviews we conducted:

- We reviewed more than 100 documents within academic literature, non-profit organization reports, and independent feminist writings and reflections, to examine existing understandings of feminist approaches to crisis response. Based on this, the research team engaged with feminists through two modalities: interviews and focus groups. These were conducted in Arabic, French, Spanish, Hindi and English. As a token of gratitude for their time, the Equality Fund provided honorariums to participants for their time and invaluable wisdom.
- We conducted seven in-depth, semi-structured interviews with feminists from Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, Middle East, Asia and the Pacific, providing insights into their experiences. Five focus groups brought together 20 feminist grassroots activists in a dynamic space for collective thoughts, enriching and validating the collected data.
- The research further adopted an ecosystem approach, examining interactions between various actors in the humanitarian landscape and acknowledging power dynamics.
- We later engaged in two focus groups with feminist funds that play a critical role in shaping and supporting an institutional feminist crisis response. In these focus groups, we heard from different feminist funds that do crisis work at multiple levels: national, regional and global.

Every endeavour has its limitations. We recognize that this mapping has been selective in its scope and approach and there are additional feminist crises response efforts that deserve more documentation and analytical engagement. For example, we were not able to engage with some philanthropic actors due to limited time and resources. While this summary cannot do complete justice to the depth of analysis and documentation

² These principles centered on a "do no harm" approach, ensuring our interactions did not cause any kind of harm to our interlocutors. Alongside this, we embraced a non-extractive methodology, focusing on not exploiting the time, knowledge, or experiences of the feminists we engaged with. We shared back the analysis and results of this research, financially compensated their time, and consensually shared contacts of other participants to build relationships. This approach was complemented by a reflexive practice, where we continually reflected on our own subjectivities, contexts, conditions, and experiences, and how these might influence our work and interactions with others.

produced by the original research, it provides key insights and food for thought in a challenging global context often described as a polycrisis, aiming to bring attention to the invisibilized, critical and underfunded work of feminist crisis response.

Unpacking Crises: A Feminist Perspective

Feminist movements, organizations, and individuals have been intimately entwined with and responsive to crises in their communities for decades. Our research seeks to delve into the fundamental question of what constitutes a crisis and how it differs from related concepts such as disaster and emergency. Beyond mere definitions, our objective is to discern how feminists across diverse philosophies, linguistic and cultural contexts define, map, and infuse political analysis into their understanding of crisis. Our exploration extends across Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Latin America, and the Caribbean, revealing that, for feminists, crises embody a devastating confluence of compounded, structural, and systemic challenges.

Feminists use a complex analysis to conceptualize crisis response. Feminists understand crises as a series of events that cause great suffering and disruption. They make distinctions between disasters, emergencies and crises.³ However, all of these events are understood within a historical and sociopolitical context that deeply informs how they are experienced. Feminist conceptualizations of crises do not aim to reproduce categorical purity: the rigid lines separating definitions. Rather, concepts are experience-based and politically shaped: the COVID-19 pandemic was declared as an acute emergency, yet for women and gender-diverse people experiencing gender-based violence, the pandemic only intensified what already was a crisis.

Crises do not materialize in isolation but are intricately woven into the fabric of structural vulnerabilities. In a world shaped by capitalism, colonialism, racism, and ableism, the impacts of crises are uneven on communities. Crises exacerbate existing

³ Al-Dahash, H., Thayaparan, M., & Kulatunga, U. (2016). "Understanding the terminologies: Disaster, crisis and emergency." In Proceedings of the 32nd annual ARCOM conference, ARCOM 2016 (pp. 1191-1200); IASC. (no date). Definition of 'complex emergencies' available here: https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/legacy_files/WG16_4.pdf; and 'Complex Humanitarian Emergencies' available here: <https://disasterphilanthropy.org/resources/complex-humanitarian-emergencies/>

inequities.⁴ A feminist lens rejects oversimplified narratives, offering a nuanced reading that emphasizes the interconnectedness of crises. This report, by exploring diverse Global South contexts, sheds light on the profound complexities in feminist perspectives. Through this lens, crises are:

Structural

Many perspectives acknowledge that crises don't emerge in isolation but are intricately linked to a web of structural vulnerabilities within our world. Feminists see forces such as capitalism, colonialism, global racism, ableism, and ongoing dispossessions as perpetuating and magnifying inequities in specific ways.

Unlike many humanitarian actors, **feminists do not adopt neutrality** in understanding and responding to crises. Instead, the feminist perspective on crises **firmly rejects oversimplifications**, insisting on recognizing complex histories and the interconnected causes behind crises. This approach provides a more **profound and comprehensive analysis** of their **structural underpinnings**.⁵

Consider the well-documented impact of capitalism and extractive practices, transferring wealth from local communities to fossil fuel corporations. Centuries of colonization have resulted in the plundering of Indigenous lands and the ravaging of ecosystems, impacts acutely felt by Indigenous communities in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and globally. Extractive colonial legacies, imperialism, racism and other systematic injustices are the stage upon which crises play out. These systematic injustices, rooted in colonial legacies, imperialism, and ongoing colonialism, give rise to various layers of oppression. In examining overlapping crises, such as those stemming

⁴ Women's Refugee Commission. (2021). Understanding Past Experiences to Strengthen Feminist Responses to Crises and Forced Displacement. Available here:

<https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/research-resources/understanding-past-experiences-to-strengthen-feminist-responses-to-crises-and-forced-displacement/>

⁵ See for example: Sultana, F. (2021) 'Climate change, covid-19, and the co-production of injustices: A feminist reading of overlapping crises', *Social and Cultural Geography*, 22(4), pp. 447–460; Bajracharya, A. et al. (2022). 'Reframing gendered disaster: Lessons from Nepal's Indigenous Women', *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 83, p. 103422; Zuber, L. (2022). A look at crisis and disaster research through a feminist lens, Feature from King's College London. Available here:

<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/a-look-at-crisis-and-disaster-research-through-a-feminist-lens>

from climate change and the global COVID-19 pandemic, it becomes apparent that vulnerabilities are deeply intertwined, affecting racialized, impoverished communities where disabled individuals, women, girls, and gender-diverse people reside in specific ways.

Compounded

Crises intensify and become intricately entwined with pre-existing vulnerabilities, as well as the marginalization and exclusions faced by communities beyond any normative understanding of crisis—defined as unplanned events with enduring impacts. The act of defining and naming what qualifies as a crisis, and by extension, whose crises matter more, carries substantial political weight. It involves acknowledging and highlighting certain moments as special, meriting political attention, discourse, and resources, potentially casting a shadow over other crucial issues.

In our research, feminists consistently underscored the swift categorization of the COVID-19 pandemic as a crisis, contrasting starkly with the often-overlooked and normalized violence endured by women and queer individuals. The question of "whose crisis?" unveils the political undercurrents shaping the definition and classification of crises. Defining and naming crises becomes inherently political—a deliberate choice that brings certain aspects into sharp relief while shrouding others in obscurity. Those who define the crisis have the power to shape public perception and policy responses. The power to name and define is a potent political tool, and one that does not represent or acknowledge all realities.

A pivotal insight from our research is the feminist conceptual understanding of crises, as emphasized by a Ugandan feminist: “**Crises are lived experiences.** They hold different meanings for communities, and they are layered; even their temporality is never linear. We must insist on this understanding because it is an exercise in feminist politics.” This perspective challenges the prevailing narrative that crises are novel and arbitrary, advocating instead for a nuanced understanding of the diverse forms of crises and their intricate layers.

The research advocates for an expanded definition of 'crisis' that is firmly rooted in local contexts and considers the local axes of oppression, exploitation, and marginalization. Thus, it must be contextual, recognizing that what holds significance in one context may not in another.

Political and Critical

Feminists recognize that those who hold power make political decisions that determine what is recognized as a crisis and what is not. In addition, they note that the concept of 'crisis' is often used to legitimize violent, neocolonial and interventionist agendas. A familiar example is the Bush administration's belated engagement with the 'humanitarian crisis' of women in Afghanistan, intending to justify the US military intervention and shore up waning domestic support for the continuing occupation of Afghanistan. The US First Lady Laura Bush, six weeks after the American invasion, described the 'fight against terrorism' as 'also a fight for the rights and dignity of women', in a national radio address.⁶

In our research, feminists consistently underscored the importance of maintaining a distinction between feminist ideas and the conventional vocabulary of crisis governance (laws and protocols that take a crisis as an opportunity to advance militaristic and imperial agendas). One strategy feminists employed is building robust connections with communities and actively supporting the advancement of issues identified as crucial. This approach is a commitment to grassroots, context-specific activism rather than conforming to external crisis response frameworks.

Beyond Humanitarian Definitions

The conventional perception of a crisis often conjures images of earthquakes or armed conflicts, prompting large-scale humanitarian interventions. While undeniably constituting crises, this prevalent image tends to mask a spectrum of emergencies that possess unique complexities and repercussions.

⁶ Bush, Laura. (2001). Radio Address to the Nation. 17 November 2001. Available here: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011117.html>

One facet of seemingly non-humanitarian crises, for example, lies in the erosion of civic spaces. Feminist activists and funds told us that they increasingly see and live the siege of civic spaces as crises. These spaces, essential for democratic discourse and civic engagement, face encroachment through various means, including restrictive legislation, censorship, and the suppression of dissenting voices. Around 70% of the world lives in closed or repressed spaces, according to CIVICUS' 2023 report on civic space.⁷ Activists and human rights defenders face tremendous risks and threats in their ability to mobilize and survive. Understanding how these limitations impact the overall effectiveness of civil society is a crucial analytical consideration. More specifically, this shrinking of civic spaces has a profound impact on women and gender-diverse human rights defenders who have been targeted and persecuted. These individuals on the frontlines advocating for equality and justice, often become casualties themselves.

Delving into the motivations, strategies, and consequences of anti-rights groups—ultraconservative local and global individuals, groups, movements, and coalitions seeking to counter social justice, gender and sexual equality—provides a comprehensive understanding of how crises manifest in different parts of the world and across multiple socio-political issues. In expanding analysis beyond humanitarian-based definitions, we unearth a mosaic of crises that transcend traditional boundaries and, as a result, gain a more nuanced understanding of the intricate interplay between various dimensions of crises.

A multidimensional and nuanced conceptualization of crises offers analytical insights to clarify and identify which crises matter, who is left out of crisis work, who is ignored, and what feminists offer as an alternative. Crises are also moments of opportunities without romanticizing them. They offer strategic windows for the grassroots to work on systemic issues while responding.

Who are Feminist Responders

Consider the concept of a crisis responder—what image typically comes to mind? It likely revolves around individuals outside the crisis-affected community, specialized in crisis intervention, and technical staff. These figures dominate mainstream narratives of

⁷ Civicus. (2023). People Power Under Attack, 2023. Available here: https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings_2023/

crisis response within humanitarian and governmental systems. However, our research reveals the vital work of everyday grassroots feminists—individuals, organizations, and movements. They are at the forefront of crisis intervention long before a crisis is officially declared.⁸

Often overlooked, under-researched, and under-resourced, feminists on the frontlines are members of movements, constituencies, and communities. They intuitively address intersecting issues, whether economic, political, social, or environmental, showcasing a nuanced understanding of the experiences and needs of their communities. Operating within the community itself, grassroots feminists become the first to respond and are well-equipped to tackle emerging crises. This approach contrasts with the conventional image of specialized technicians operating from outside the crisis-affected community.

Diverse feminist movements, with their intergenerational histories and geographical specificity, have long fought for social justice by addressing structural root causes and intersecting forms of marginalization in their own communities and beyond. These movements have spent decades advocating for women's and LGBTQI+ rights, focusing on bodily health and access to rights in repressive contexts, striving for economic justice, and more.

A Portrait of A Feminist Grassroots Responder

Ntumba, once a teacher, now identifies as a feminist organizer from the resource-laden eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). She has devoted decades to advocating for peace and gender justice. With many men and young boys leaving for war fronts or contested mines, Ntumba and her community seized the chance to engage local women, girls, and boys in addressing structural problems fueling violence and heightening gender-based violence (GBV). She has been pivotal in establishing solidarity circles amongst women, aiding them in securing livelihoods. They initiated alternative education centres in violence-stricken areas beyond state reach, campaigned against ethnic conflicts and sexual and gender based violence (SGBV), and managed shelters for violence survivors. Her efforts have markedly

⁸ Our research also acknowledges that grassroots crisis response is not limited to feminists.

reduced child recruitment into armed factions, sexual exploitation, and forced marriages. Women's self-help and social bonding initiatives have flourished due to this work. In recent outbreaks of intense conflict,⁹ Ntumba and other feminist grassroots started responding to immediate needs while striving for long-term transformation.

It is unsurprising that this deeply entrenched work within contextual and structural landscapes positions feminist grassroots actors and movements as the first and most adept responders. However, they also find themselves among the most under-resourced and ignored. When crises unfold, feminist grassroots entities transition from their regular activities, such as advocacy, awareness-raising, and service provision, to become responders, employing multiple means and strategies (explored in the following section).

Notably, some feminists distinguish between those directly experiencing crises and those actively responding to them. This dichotomy is not a contradiction but rather reflects a nuanced understanding of how feminist grassroots responders are context dependent. In the African context, specifically, insights from multiple feminist activists and thinkers highlight that responders may not always be those directly living the crisis. A clear example is the multiple attacks and regressive policies jeopardizing the lives of gender-diverse individuals, LGBTQI+ communities, and sex workers across various African contexts like Uganda and Kenya. The organized, state-approved nature of these attacks on vulnerable and marginalized populations, coupled with the structural marginalization these communities endure, heightens the risks and vulnerabilities of those under attack. In such cases, other feminists may step into the role of responders. Human rights defenders and organizers who are allies and supporters of systematically threatened communities can also assume this role. It is not solely about expertise but about identifying those best positioned to assist and intervene.

As we explore the dynamics of feminist grassroots responders, it is also essential to look at the experiences of traditional responders—entities often associated with established national or international organizations and governments. This comparison

⁹ Norwegian Refugee Council. (2023). DR Congo: An Unprecedented Crisis Goes Ignored. 23 August 2023. Available here: <https://www.nrc.no/news/2023/august/drc-an-unprecedented-crisis-goes-ignored/>

highlights shared criticisms and challenges within the realm of crisis response. Feminist grassroots responders operate within an ecosystem alongside various responders, a term commonly associated with established international organizations, governments, and aid agencies involved in humanitarian crises. These entities have historically played a vital role in providing assistance during acute emergencies, utilizing standardized protocols and frameworks for various crises, such as natural disasters, conflicts, or public health emergencies. It is crucial to recognize that non-feminist responders, referred to here as traditional responders, exhibit heterogeneity in their trajectories, politics, and intervention models. Despite theoretical acknowledgment of diversity, feminist grassroots activists and movements often experience them homogeneously, challenging the assumption that diverse responders naturally lead to diverse grassroots experiences. Their experiences share common criticisms and challenges associated with traditional responders, including issues of cultural sensitivity, coordination gaps, and top-down intervention approaches.¹⁰

Weaving Threads of Feminist Response to Crises

From the previous example detailing the experiences of a feminist grassroots responder, we can see (and other examples from the research corroborate) how feminist responses to crises have essential elements that differentiate it from other responses. They are: intersectional, community-centric, long-term and care focused.

Intersectional

Throughout feminist narratives, crisis response is not feminist if it is not intersectional. A feminist activist said: “Within our various identities, we need to recognize the dynamics and manifestations of the multilayered oppressions against communities affected by crises, which is explicitly demonstrated in our political responses to these crises. Our work as feminists will always be incomplete if we focus only on resourcing those affected by certain events.” A Congolese feminist exemplifies this perspective, citing the evolving work of feminist organizations in the DRC. Particularly in the conflict-ridden eastern Congo, these organizations recognize the critical link between

¹⁰ Mulder, F. (2023). ‘The paradox of externally driven localisation: a case study on how local actors manage the contradictory legitimacy requirements of top-down bottom-up aid.’ *Journal of International Humanitarian Action*, 8(7), 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41018-023-00139-0>

environmental disasters and resources, notably water, and the provision of effective sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services.

Displacement often results in precarious living conditions where access to clean water becomes a fundamental need for survival and control over resources is often exacerbated by ethnic, political and community tensions. In this context, access to water is not only a need to mitigate health risks related to SRHR, but also an opportunity to address structural issues around collective control of natural resources and cultivation of women's leadership in community spaces. Not infrequently, conflict is also a matter of communities battling each other, with the 'ethnic divisions' artificially created by the colonizer sometimes being whipped up again by opportunistic leaders. By addressing specific needs that emerge at the intersection of armed conflict and natural disasters, these feminist organizations exemplify a nuanced and intersectional response that strives to mitigate the compounding effects of various forms of adversity.

Feminists have been advancing intersectional agendas among Indigenous, conflict-affected, environmental and climate issues, racial and political movements to build long-term capacity and awareness while responding to crisis. Feminist crises response is rooted in the importance of intersectionality and recognizes that gender disparities are interconnected with other forms of oppression: economic, environmental, social and political.

It signifies an understanding that effective feminist responses to crises must go **beyond surface-level aid** to address the **systemic issues** perpetuating these crises.

Community Centric

When feminists respond to crises, it's in stark contrast to humanitarian approaches that centre the individual. Their approach is distinctly community-centered. This feminist practice recognizes that community is not a homogenous set of people but, rather, a concept reflecting relational work invested in empowering individuals to collaborate,

coexist, and challenge structural issues together.¹¹ Community-based systems do not emerge overnight; they are nurtured through years of community members' resource-intensive and strategic work.¹² Feminists' efforts to create autonomous economic, political, or social systems are often misunderstood as low-impact initiatives that benefit a few instead of radical proposals to reimagine society according to a different set of values. But it is often these small projects that lay the foundation for community resilience to crises and sustain communities over the long-term.

Centring communities in feminist responses to crises is a vital strategy because it reorients communities around a shared vision for a sustainable future by restoring hope and reclaiming values of mutual, collective action.

The research clearly demonstrates that feminist leadership during crisis response is a highly effective and under-utilized resource. Grassroots feminists have demonstrated that even in the most restrictive of environments, they actively seek out opportunities to play an active role in supporting their community to respond and regenerate. Grassroots feminists have been particularly instrumental in ensuring that the most vulnerable members of the community do not get left behind. "First and foremost, a crisis never affects just one person. They impact multiple individuals that form a community. So, the response is necessarily community-based," reflected a Congolese feminist.

Visionary and Long Term

A cornerstone of feminist crisis response lies in its political approach to addressing immediate needs and the overarching, long-term contexts of crises simultaneously. When operating as frontline responders, feminist activists make a strategic, tactical shift towards urgent necessities as a part of their profound commitment to transforming the foundational conditions fostering injustice and violence. The literature underlines the unique capability of feminist grassroots, deeply immersed in long-term preventative and transformational strategies, positioning them as particularly adept crisis

¹¹ Banerjee, S. (2022). 'Community Spaces in India: Constructing Solidarity during the Pandemic' in *Social Movements and Politics During COVID-19* by Brigel, B., and Pleyers, G. (eds.). Bristol University Press.

¹² Wafa Awni Alkhadra. (2023). 'Barefoot niswiyya in practice and theory: the case of grassroots feminists in Jordan', *Gender & Development*, 31(1), 71-88.

responders. The development of systemic approaches is a gradual process nurtured over years of cross-movement collaboration, involving organizing, political dialogues to build shared agendas, and the practical testing and refining of ideas. Over decades, diverse coalitions comprising feminists, women’s rights activists, Indigenous groups, racial justice movements, human rights advocates, corporate accountability groups, labour movements, and environmental activists have collectively forged intersectional frameworks, shaping the trajectory of feminist responses.

Care-Centred

Care is at the core of feminist work. Multiple conceptions about care, healing, and protection exist according to the particular conditions of each context and personal experience, shaped by history and social struggles worldwide. Mostly, care invokes a world undergirded by deep respect, mutuality, nourishment and life-affirmation and releases us from relationships of domination, control and violence. Care becomes a central thread in organizing feminist thinking and praxis because as Black feminist Saidiya Hartman famously said “care is the antidote to violence—we do not yet know a world where people learn first and foremost that others are to be loved and cared for.”¹³ An Egyptian feminist told us that “in our context, survival is collective, and so is care.”

Care is intrinsic to feminist thought: a core logic, a mode of relation, an animating force and a condition of possibility. But the path to care is unevenly held; women hold unpaid care responsibilities and are rarely recognized for it. Our analysis uncovers the paradox of care: it is that which is often violently expropriated, that by which people grind out persistence in unsurvivable conditions, and that which offers some of the most revolutionary, hopeful possibilities for flourishing together. This tension is at the heart of grassroots practice and thinking in and beyond feminist responses to crisis.¹⁴

Crises perpetuate the burden on grassroots feminists, mirrored in their inevitable rapid response without the resources to care for themselves. Making decisions on a daily basis and being in the world mindfully—that is care. “Not everything depends on things

¹³ Sadiya Hartman, at a colloquium on Christina Sharpe’s *Into the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. <https://bcw.barnard.edu/videos/in-the-wake-a-salon-in-honor-of-christina-sharpe/>

¹⁴ Urgent Action Funds. (2023). How can we ground ourselves in care and dance our revolution? https://rootingcare.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/FAU_RootingCare_en.pdf

outside of us; we have agency and creative capacity,” said a Haitian grassroots feminist. In this sense, care is deeply political, and the practice of care can destabilize power structures, question, and transform various types of oppression that activists and communities face in their daily life and organizing.

Care is also a multidimensional system. Structurally, care involves the broader systemic material and socioeconomic conditions that provide people with dignified lives. Regardless of the context, the widespread precariousness of conditions in which many activists in the world live and work is a common reality. This systemic deterioration of care is manifested in and linked to lack of retirement pensions, social security, and safety nets, health insurance, etc. This is further exacerbated by the fact that funding for the social change sector more broadly tends to value narrow, results-based funding approaches and fails to prioritize the wellness and care of activists or the sustainability of their movements. Grassroots actors are often working on a volunteer basis and have to find paid work to support themselves. For instance, feminist organizers in Thailand shared that they are experimenting with an innovative scheme they are calling “care work compensation.” This care work compensation reconfigures the value of work dedicated to build community and its regeneration. As a scheme, it provides income for organizers who often provide movements and their communities with invaluable skills and resources but are never recognized as such.

Weaving Strategies of Feminist Crises Response

While there are common elements or threads that differentiate feminist crises responses, the strategies they use are as diverse and vibrant as a rainbow. They encompass a wide array of approaches, from community organizing, advocacy, and evacuation and relocation, to intersectional dialogues, healing justice initiatives, and the creation of alternative ways of living. Feminist approaches to crisis response stand out for their distinctive weaving of key tenets (the ‘threads’) with diverse and innovative approaches (the ‘strategies’). Some of these strategies are highlighted below.

Holistic Needs

“Regardless of the type of crisis, if people have lost their access to food, to a safe place to stay and are in constant run from prosecution and violence, forget about thinking of the future. Basic survival needs have to be met first,” said a grassroots feminist from South Sudan.

While the grassroots feminists we have interviewed do not necessarily engage in large scale aid distributions, they meet the basic needs of women, girls and gender-diverse people through a variety of techniques and strategies. Operating from the context that crises exacerbate violence and its intersectional manifestations, grassroots feminists address survival needs within sociocultural contexts and through dignity. For example, across three different crises contexts in Morocco, Jordan and Syria, feminists told us that women and girls have negligible access to menstrual hygiene products. Despite the fact that it is known in the aid assistance ecosystem that period poverty worsens due to the gender-blind prioritization of other needs, “the sector still operates as if menstruation takes a pause when exceptional events happen,” said a Moroccan feminist. These grassroots feminists mobilized for feminine sanitary basic needs and programmed distributions with sexual and reproductive health education and awareness.¹⁵ Grassroots perspectives on meeting basic needs extend beyond provisions to engaging with those in need as change agents and leaders: Needs are placed within the broader transformation that women and gender-diverse people seek. They worked on improving mobility as a result of access to sanitation products, bodily autonomy and integrity within their households, ability to resume educational and community activities and much more.

The feminist grassroots approach to essential needs also confronts stigmas and misconceptions, aiming to destigmatize women's needs beyond immediate relief efforts. Illustrated by Syrian refugee women, feminists pushed for the inclusion of

¹⁵ Read about United Nations Populations Fund’s (UNFPA) evaluation of its dignity kits across humanitarian contexts and its recognition of the importance of a more sustainable, deep and paradigm shifting intervention. The report acknowledges the role of local partners in making dignity kits part of a more comprehensive response plan by integrating community sensitization and education around key issues.
https://www.sipa.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/migrated/migrated/documents/UNFPA_Final%2520Report_24June11.pdf

shaving cream or razors in hygiene kits, to empower women in confronting GBV when they are already vulnerable in larger structural violence situations. Crisis situations intensify SGBV,^{16]} making it crucial to address basic needs alongside the broader sociopolitical context.

With rape being used as a weapon of war in many conflict settings, grassroots feminists provide medical and psychosocial support to survivors and setting up safe houses. Numerous women's rights organizations in conflict settings grew out of the necessity to address the specific needs of sexual violence survivors, but often their activities expand as they aim to tackle the root causes of violence. For example, SOFEPADI, a coalition of 40 women's rights organizations in DRC, formed to support sexual violence survivors by establishing a clinic to medically treat survivors and provide psychosocial support.^{17]} Their work then expanded to include skills and vocational training for survivors and working to reintegrate them into their communities and for them to play leadership roles in GBV prevention.

Rapid Response

Despite facing immense challenges, feminist organizers have consistently demonstrated the ability to intervene swiftly and provide support using available resources. This remarkable capacity arises from their close connection to the communities they serve, which enables them to grasp immediate needs and respond accordingly.

It can take several weeks for international humanitarian actors to reach remote communities after a crisis and during that time, **feminist grassroots have often emerged organically as leaders** while assisting their community to respond to the crisis.

For example, international humanitarian agencies were unable to access some affected communities for several weeks after the earthquake brought down entire villages in

¹⁶ Humanitarian Action. (2022). The pervasive and damaging effects of gender-based violence in humanitarian emergencies. Available here:

<https://humanitarianaction.info/article/pervasive-and-damaging-effects-gender-based-violence-humanitarian-emergencies>

¹⁷ See SOFEPADI, <http://www.sofepadirdc.org/> for more information

2023 in Morocco due to road closures with debris. During that time, affected communities were dependent on feminist and women-led organizations that worked with those communities for years. A Moroccan feminist told us, “When the state was still trying to clear up the roads or make new roads, we worked with volunteers and brought donkeys to make the journey walking to provide essential survival elements. Waiting for too long without food, shelter, and water would have killed as many people as the earthquake.”

Syrian feminists recounted similar challenges when responding to the Turkey-Syria earthquake amid the protracted context of war and refugee crises. As the disaster struck, international organizations responsible for humanitarian assistance faced significant delays and obstacles due to bureaucratic paperwork and vetting processes required to navigate sanctions and ensure compliance. In contrast to bureaucratic systems that often struggle to respond adequately to the diverse needs of women and gender-diverse individuals, feminists' hands-on approach enabled them to rapidly identify and address critical issues. Their ability to cut through red tape and prioritize the immediate well-being of those at risk showcases the power of grassroots action.

However, there is a caveat. **Despite feminists utilizing rapid response as a key strategy, grassroots feminists have expressed frustration with shouldering roles and responsibilities typically assigned to the state.** “Sometimes I feel that we are asked to do everything. It is not only demoralizing, but it also depoliticizes the work that grassroots do. We respond, we don't take over responsibilities of states to meet the rights and needs of their citizens,” expressed a Syrian feminist. These responsibilities span critical areas such as healthcare, education, disaster relief, and more. The pressure on feminists to fill the voids left by the state or other international agencies highlights systemic failures and the absence of comprehensive services. While these responsibilities should rightfully be within the state's purview, feminists often find themselves with no alternative but to step in and address these fundamental needs. Rapid response as a strategy, acknowledges the disproportionate impact on women, girls, and gender-diverse populations during crises.

Relief and Evacuation

Feminist responders strategically use evacuation as a multi-dimensional approach, especially in contexts where crises disproportionately affect vulnerable and marginalized communities. A notable example is the network of Moroccan grassroots activists in rural Indigenous Amazigh areas of Morocco, where they assisted women and their children fleeing domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic curfews. Roadblocks and movement restrictions, imposed to comply with public health protocols, left women in regions already marked by severe inequalities alone in their need to escape and find shelter. Leveraging grassroots expertise, feminist activists mobilized local networks to establish evacuation routes and shelter spaces during the pandemic.

Feminists representing movements and organizations who have participated in coordinating evacuations reflected on the numerous challenges. In Afghanistan, even when women human rights defender (WHRD) evacuees were issued visas, international security forces at the airport required them to produce passports for access—requiring women to get their husbands’ permission.¹⁸ Additionally, a feminist from India shared: “most governments wanted us to produce evacuation lists of WHRDs without including their families. They failed to understand that defenders are part of communities and families they cannot leave behind.”¹⁹ Ugandan and Kenyan grassroots feminists shared other less-known efforts to find safe shelters for those persecuted because of their gender identity, sexual orientation, and activism. Global Witness reported that 200 land and environmental defenders were killed in 2021, of which 81 were women.²⁰ In 2022, Front Line Defenders reported that 401 human rights defenders were killed, of which 69 were women and trans women.²¹ In the African context, the concepts of relief and evacuation are closely linked to the protection of activists, thus expanding the scope of

¹⁸ Also see <https://www.broadagenda.com.au/2023/helping-afghan-womens-rights-defenders-fleeing-the-taliban/>

¹⁹ See VOICE 2022 report, ‘Taking Myself out of the Darkness: Afghan Women Human Rights Defenders’ Fight for Recognition’ that analyzed the realities facing displaced Afghan women human rights defenders in Afghanistan, bordering countries and western nations one year since the Taliban’s takeover. <https://voiceamplified.org/afghan-women-human-rights-defenders-fight-for-recognition/>

²⁰ Global Witness. (2021). A Global Analysis, 2021. Available here: <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/decade-defiance/#a-global-analysis-2021>

²¹ Front Line Defenders. (2022). Global Analysis 2022. https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/1535_fld_ga23_web.pdf

what these strategies entail in feminist crisis response: they are context-dependent and comprehensive. This approach encompasses both the immediate need to relocate feminist activists and human rights defenders and the search for long-term safe spaces.

Safe Spaces

Grassroots feminist responders are pivotal in establishing and maintaining shelters and safe spaces during crises, providing vital sanctuaries for women, girls, and gender-diverse individuals. A 'safe' space ensures an environment where individuals can live freely and express themselves without fear of harm, trauma and violence. Grassroots feminists approach safe spaces from multiple perspectives: they are physical shelters, women's circles, displaced people and refugee camps, clubs, community houses, etc. These spaces are essential for fostering leadership, agency, and collective capacity among communities, enabling them to define and address their protection needs.

After Hurricane Matthew devastated southwest Haiti in October 2016, a collective of young Haitian feminists spearheaded a women-led group to coordinate the establishment of women's safe spaces. These spaces acted as hubs for women's rights and protection. One of the organizers reflected:

"Other shelters existed in the crisis hubs. But we realized shelters are not just spaces for passive refuge. We rallied to coordinate other community-led shelters, to infuse them with rights-based programming. Our aim was for women seeking safety not only to find refuge but to actively come together, support each other, and build their knowledge and awareness of their rights. The hurricane response was an opportunity for us to move the work we have been doing around gender-based violence forward, and to let women who were seen previously as victims lead the fight."

LGBTQI+ communities have deployed protection mechanisms as a critical strategy in crisis response where they face exclusions and higher risks of social marginalization and violence. Many grassroots are operating low-profile safe houses for LGBTQI+

people who have been constantly targeted in “social cleansing” led by violent groups to murder gender-diverse people and activists (e.g., Colombia and Nepal).²²

In other contexts, grassroots feminists have used safe spaces for crisis preparedness. In Kenya, the sex workers movement had already been running ‘reflect circles’ for women as part of preparedness activities, where women reflect on current issues, challenges, and power relations. These circles were vital for the sex worker community to discuss threats to their safety and security in their everyday lives and identify strategies to reduce vulnerability. In times of heightened violence against sex workers and faced by the state’s complacent lack of intervention, these circles are activated to provide protection.²³ Peers share information related to police raids and violent clients, look out for each other, and check on each other’s whereabouts, create a database of contact details, and establish a coordinated alert system. Given that crises for sex workers in Kenya are the norm rather than the exception, safe spaces are a mechanism for both preparedness and response.

As a feminist strategy of crisis response, the impact of safe spaces extends beyond the need for shelter, protection and safety for women, girls and gender-diverse people. At its core, it flips the humanitarian paradigm on its head by centring collective and community-based responses and leadership. This aims to reconstruct lives and uphold women’s and gender-diverse people’s ability to lead, envision and rebuild their social networks and support structures towards a more structural social change.

Mobilizing Solidarity

Grassroots feminists actively mobilize their networks for intersectional solidarity, taking explicit political stances and leveraging resources for media visibility, protective measures, and the relocation of feminist defenders. For instance, during the Turkey and Syria earthquake, feminist organizations in Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon unified their efforts, providing temporary shelter and fundraising, surpassing limitations imposed by

²² Human Rights Watch. (2006). Nepal: Police on “Sexual Cleansing” Drive. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2006/01/13/nepal-police-sexual-cleansing-drive>; and <https://colombiadiversa.org/ddhh-lgbt/EN/>

²³ Kenya Sex Workers Alliance. (2020). Sex Work and Violence in Kenya. Available here: <https://keswa-kenya.org/assets/publications/sw-violence-in-kenya.pdf>

the ongoing Syrian conflict and financial regulatory restrictions. These organizations, and Syrian refugee grassroots feminists living in neighbouring countries, mobilized their regional networks and social justice collectives to support responders with resources and facilities to regroup and reorganize.

Solidarity is not a neutral playing field and feminist solidarity involves navigating complex internal tensions within movements while demanding accountability in its practice. For instance, the support extended to Ukraine's feminist movement far outweighs that offered to Sudan's resilient feminist movement. A Pakistani feminist expressed: "I hate essentializing anything that we call feminist. We have to think how we can practice solidarity while holding ourselves accountable to the excesses to how it is done. Solidarity starts with asking others what they want and need."

Solidarity does not evade the colonial hegemony that defines the exchange between the Global North and the Global South. To that end, feminist grassroots movements strategize beyond idealizing solidarity; they view it as active, political, and resource-intensive work. IM-Defensoras, a leading organization mobilizing networks of feminist defenders across Central and Latin America, stands as a prime example of how Southern feminists redefine the normative understanding of solidarity.²⁴ They invest significant resources, time, and energy in bringing defenders together to navigate movement conflicts, share strategies and experiences, and create spaces for collective care and healing practices. This deliberate, long-term formation of relationships and networks is what underpins feminist solidarity.

Alternative Community Hubs

While many dream of a just and feminist world, there are those who are already building it through something that we are calling the community hub. Small villages where activists create the world they dream of, communal homes where activists can visit to convene, rest and heal, farms and ecological spaces that sustain activists and rebuild their relationships with land, and festivals that bring together communities in celebration and joy. The spectrum of community hubs is diverse in creating alternative spaces that centre feminist core tenets of care, healing and political visioning.

²⁴ See IM-Defensoras, <https://im-defensoras.org/> for more information.

Equality fund

WHEN WE MOVE TOGETHER, WE MOVE THE WORLD

“...the crises we have seen, and socio environmental disasters are going to be more frequent. The exercise of imagining, in feminist and political ways, is about asking how we can create spaces different from capitalist spaces. For example, how can we live with less imported food or supermarkets. How can we cultivate our herbs and our food to care for our minds and bodies. How can we create more spaces for joy for love. It is becoming harder and harder. There’s less time to meet each other, less time for friendships. How can our strategies give us more power not just political but also to create alternatives.” Grassroots feminist from Honduras.

Feminists’ efforts to create these autonomous spaces are often under-recognized because they are small-scale and implemented locally. They are misunderstood as low-impact initiatives that benefit a few, rather than bold or radical proposals to reimagine society according to a different set of values. But it is often these small projects that lay the foundation for community resistance to injustices. They can restore hope, reclaim values, and re-orient communities around a shared vision for a sustainable future. But community-based systems do not emerge overnight; they are nurtured over years through the hard work of community members, sometimes helped by long-term capacity-building and technical support from trusted allies.

Communal spaces fostering collective care and alternative relationships with land and economy have thrived across diverse feminist landscapes. In Kyrgyzstan, the *Bishkek Feminist Initiatives* established a communal home in 2009, serving as a vital hub for activist revitalization. Armenian feminists launched *Stega*; an inclusive wellness movement in 2016, emphasizing somatic therapy for community healing for activists and defenders who have dedicated their lives for this work. In Morocco, *Doar*, quite literally meaning the village, created in 2019 by and for feminists and gender-diverse individuals, fosters an open, collective, non-discriminatory space to co-build a just future. In Honduras, feminist houses have nurtured activists since the late 2000s, focusing on communal gardening and cooking for healing and reconciliation with the land. Urgent Action Fund-Africa spearheads the Feminist Republik, aiming to cultivate a care and healing movement culture for feminists and women and LGBTQI+ human rights defenders. The Republik is working on creating a farm to provide a physical communal space.

In addressing crises on a **structural level**, they focus their creative energies on **nurturing transformational imagination**.

They highlight the creation of alternative community spaces as a strategy, harnessing imagination's concrete power and establishing alternative politics rooted in communal connections. In response, this fosters long-term visions that don't simply react but proactively visualize and build alternative futures disrupted by crisis. They can also sustain communities engaged in social struggles with a vision of a better alternative future.

Research and Community Diagnosis

Frontline feminists, collaborating with community members and NGOs, increasingly spearhead documentation and research, crafting tools to evaluate impact, navigate outcomes, support litigation, and engage with the forces behind structural issues. These methods bridge the gaps in official socio-political impact assessments, especially concerning marginalized groups. Community-led research unveils systemic injustices' root causes, exposes oppressive power structures, addresses local, national, regional, and global concerns, and much more. An Indonesian feminist recounted the shift in implementing participatory research involving Indigenous women from agricultural communities affected by recurring natural disasters and pervasive gender-based violence:

"We, as Indigenous women farmers, embarked on participatory action research to understand the chronic violence women experience across various spheres of life and the looming environmental crisis. It expanded our perspective beyond our village, all of a sudden, we started to understand the nature of this violence and how it is connected."

Community research becomes a potent tool, disrupting prevailing narratives and empowering movements. Relying on local expertise, participatory research yields more credible information than outsider-led assessments, fostering community unity and addressing common issues. It also strengthens local feminist leadership and community cohesion to counter divisive tactics aimed at weakening resistance. For instance, in Asia and the Pacific, community-led research empowered women in

frontline communities to confront land and resource exploitation: Their documentation played a pivotal role in advocacy and narrative change. Additionally, community-led research highlighted Indigenous and rural communities' role as land stewards, forming the basis for negotiation with power-holding institutions and advocacy campaigns for women's land ownership and sustainable resource management.

For marginalized women and other groups, community-led research is crucial as it addresses internal community hierarchies that may create divisions and exclusions. This strategy revolving around research signifies the necessity for sustained commitment, not just to equip communities with knowledge and tactical skills for deeper impact, but also to delve into how structures like patriarchy operate, muting the voices of women and gender-diverse individuals and curtailing their agency.

Community diagnosis involves participatory assessments that unveil a community's opportunities, threats, and vulnerabilities. Grassroots use this method to identify risks that exacerbate structural injustices during crises. For instance, a Mexican feminist working in Chiapas noted how environmental limitations aggravated the impacts of an earthquake, intensifying conflicts over scarce natural resources and leading to increased violence. Working with the community to diagnose their expanded risks meant addressing power structures and barriers and identifying key opportunities to mobilize for collective action. Having comprehensive plans that address different levels of risk empowers feminists to respond effectively and mobilize support.

Political Visioning and Long-Term Strategizing

This means to actively construct futures grounded in justice. "To build a better future, we must have better images of the future," said a Hong Kong grassroots feminist. Grassroots feminists grapple with the challenge of creating spaces that enable a continuum: effecting short-term change while aiming for a long-term outlook.

“It is more liberating to take that long-term lens, more liberating than being buffeted by short-term challenges. Long-term thinking shifts our mindset from spotting threats to seeing the opportunities and envisioning different scenarios about how you could pivot to capitalize on certain opportunities.”

As a strategy, feminists actively establish clear political priorities, create a shared understanding of potential solutions to structural problems, and define paths to take coordinated action and articulate visions for the future. Organizing with and support from others help to shape these visions into conceptual frameworks. These then become tools to mobilize communities by speaking directly to their concerns, while also influencing social movements to tackle the drivers of structural issues, not just their effects. In this research, grassroots feminists emphasized how these endeavours intensify because movements work at the intersection of issues. Despite funding silos within human rights funding, movements collaborate because their struggles are shared.

Feminist grassroots actors and movements recognize the importance of political visioning as a strategic tool in their response to crises, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive understanding of injustices, their root causes, and a clear vision of transformative change. This vision is dynamic and evolves through deep analysis, action, and understanding of power structures. “We keep saying crises are not the exception. We solidify this critical statement by having a long-term political vision, with clear analysis of the various pieces of the puzzle,” shared a Jordanian feminist. These movements engage in cross-movement collaborations to shape narratives and organize efforts towards broader agendas for change, building power bases and alliances. Despite resource and capacity limitations, grassroots feminists are committed to this process, which can span years or decades, continually adapting to new challenges and trends, and investing in future visions and paths to action, ultimately steering towards resilient communities and transformative change.

Fostering Feminist Response to Crises: The Role of Feminist Funds

The ecosystem of crisis response encompasses a diverse array of actors, strategies, and philosophies. Within this space emerges the pivotal role of feminist funds—as acknowledged by feminist grassroots movements and organizations—for their vital support in enabling crisis response. Feminist funds increasingly recognize the need for a broader understanding and strategic framework that charts a feminist lens into crisis response. The expanding roles within feminist movements and the human rights

funding landscape unfold against a backdrop of continued underfunding of grassroots gender justice movements worldwide.²⁵ Despite recent efforts to finance gender equality and collective feminist action, there is a persistent failure to channel substantial, sustained and flexible resources to feminist movements. This is exacerbated by backlash against gender justice globally,²⁶ with financing often directed against the rights of women and LGBTQI+ individuals in service of fundamentalist and ultraconservative agendas.²⁷

Feminist funds play a pivotal role in supporting grassroots efforts to shape their crisis response while strategically positioning themselves within the funding ecosystem. These funds have expanded their presence, actively engaging with a diverse range of stakeholders, including humanitarian institutions, bilateral agencies, and philanthropic bodies. Within this context, they advocate for the profound impact of grassroots feminist responders and the effectiveness of feminist crisis response strategies

Catalyzing Models in Crisis Work

Feminist funds approach crisis response based on the knowledge, experiences and needs of feminist and gender justice movements. Most adopt a movement-led approach. Others are developing trust-based grantmaking models to reshape resource narratives and distributions to respond to the priorities and strategies of feminist grassroots movements. A critical pillar organizing this work is active listening to activists. This steers funds and positions them within the ecosystem to nurture feminist crisis response, following on from the decade-long shift in the feminist funding ecosystem to move better and bolder resources. Foundational feminist funding

²⁵ Dolker, T. (2021). Where is the Money for Feminist Organizing? Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID). Available here: https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/AWID_Research_WITM_Brief_ENG.pdf

²⁶ Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Gender Justice. (2023). Global Resistance to Anti-Gender Opposition: LGBTQI+ Activism in Colombia, India, Kenya, Peru and Serbia. Available here: <https://s3.amazonaws.com/astraea.production/app/asset/uploads/2023/10/Global-Resistance-to-Anti-gender-Opposition-2023-Full-Report.pdf>

²⁷ Global Philanthropy Project. (2020). Meet the Moment: A Call for Progressive Philanthropic Response to the Anti-Gender Movement. <https://globalphilanthropyproject.org/2020/11/12/meet-the-moment/>

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WHEN WE MOVE TOGETHER, WE MOVE THE WORLD

principles, such as “Feminist Funding Principles²⁸,” “Principles for Feminist Funding²⁹,” and “Toward a Feminist Funding Ecosystem³⁰,” are catalyzed into models of growing feminist crises response. Notably, crucial aspects guiding crisis responses by feminist funds rest on deep engagement with the politics of money, responsiveness, and preparedness.

Politicizing Resources

Feminist funds engage with the politics of money in resourcing feminist crises response. Money is political: Those who hold it traditionally have the power. Feminist funds recognize and actively challenge this dynamic that perpetuates inequalities. To do so, feminist funds engage with crisis responders not merely as ‘beneficiaries’ but as proven decision-makers, experts, drivers, and leaders of social change. They empower grassroots leadership by providing a wide array of resources, emphasizing that flexible and sustained core funding in crisis response sustains the movement itself, not just its work.

Often, the political definition of crisis limits the ability of feminist movements to perceive it as catastrophic attacks that threaten their existence. Some feminist funds emphasized the importance of identifying the under-resourcing of feminist movements as a crisis in and of itself. It reframes the discussion from a broad necessity for flexible resourcing to a nuanced approach that elevates the risks and the harms grassroots are often subjected to in their crisis response work. In this exploration, these feminist funds aim to redefine the essence of responsiveness within institutional frameworks that facilitate and nurture a feminist approach to crisis response.

Responsive Funding

Responsive funding mechanisms have become a priority for feminist funds aiming to support diverse gender justice movements, emphasizing an intersectional approach. Recent analysis of crisis responses by these funds reveals a growing trend in

²⁸ Astraea Foundation. Feminist Funding Principles. Available here: <https://astraeafoundation.org/microsites/feminist-funding-principles/>

²⁹ Canadian Women’s Foundation, Community Foundations of Canada, and the Equality Fund. (2020). Principles for Feminist Funding. Available here: <https://equalityfund.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Feminist-Philanthropy-EN.pdf>

³⁰ Miller, K. and Jones, R. (2019). Toward a Feminist Funding Ecosystem. AWID. Available here: https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/AWID_Funding_Ecosystem_2019_FINAL_Eng.pdf

supporting grassroots initiatives led by young feminists, Black feminists, Indigenous women, individuals with disabilities, migrants, refugees, informal workers, sex workers, and other marginalized groups. This shift transcends the traditional reactionary approach to resourcing crises. Funds are now engaged in a deeper exploration, cultivating an institutional ethos that prioritizes flexibility, care, and preparedness. This involves crafting a holistic approach that not only reacts to crises but is intricately designed to confront their structural nature.

Preparedness

To respond in a proactive manner requires feminist funds to be prepared. Funds spoke of preparedness as a multidimensional principle, and as a political commitment that challenges the notion of inevitability in the face of systemic crisis. Feminist funds identified that preparedness allows their feminist response to crisis to act on the longer-term trends that are stifling civic spaces where feminist movements thrive and mobilize and the compounded crises happening at multiple levels. In focusing on being prepared for long-term crises, feminist funds are building a model of response that acts on trends that are structural and intersecting. In a way, preparedness is not only about preparing for the next crisis, but proactively shaping the future. Preparedness from a feminist lens is an exercise to chart visions of a desired future, whilst at the same time building the concrete paths to move closer to that future. It is a shifting strategy to move resources. It's more about long-term propositional change work that has to be deeply anchored in addressing the drivers and trends of crises. Trends may erupt as a crisis at a particular moment in time, but when the crisis subsides, the underlying trends persist—ongoing, worsening, intersecting.

These three entry points for feminist funds creating a feminist response to crises are foundational pillars from which feminist funds diverge in their operational models. Some feminist funds are primary rapid responders, swiftly allocating resources to meet the urgent needs of grassroots feminists, such as the Urgent Action Fund (UAF) Sisterhood and Reconstruction Women's Fund. Rapid response is a practical grantmaking model that is agile and nimble. It integrates knowledge of emerging trends impacting defenders and grassroots feminists in real time to move resources quickly to support them. Typically, rapid response funds accept grant requests throughout the year and in any language. Grant requests receive a response within three days and

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funds are made available within a week. This model was established to empower women activists to seize unforeseen opportunities, mitigate and respond to threats, and prevent regression in their efforts. Yet, rapid response grants are small, short term grants that address immediate needs. Longer resourcing models that address the prolonged nature of crises and activists' needs are also in demand.

Conversely, other feminist funds employ a slower and more extended response mechanism, focusing on grantmaking, learning, documentation, movement-building, and advocacy. These funds play a crucial role in supporting various grassroots crisis strategies and needs beyond immediate relief efforts. They exist at multiple geographical and operational scales: globally (i.e., Global Fund for Women, Mama Cash, Equality Fund), regionally (i.e., African Women's Development Fund, Mediterranean Women's Fund, Women's Fund Asia, XOESE, Pacific Feminist Fund), and nationally (i.e., Ukrainian Women's Fund, TEWA, HER Fund, Fondo Semillas, Fondo Alquimia, Fund for Congolese Women).

It is worth noting that national feminist funds, and to a degree regional ones, have the capacity to shift from rapid to non-rapid grantmaking because of the relatively limited geographies they respond to and mobilize in. More importantly, this research reveals that these models are not rigid; for instance, rapid responders like the UAF Sisterhood are strategically evolving towards broader, longer-term visions. A rapid response feminist funder said: "Even when carrying out rapid response funding, we have an eye towards meeting short-term needs, while also building the long-term infrastructure that will transform systems and protect grassroots communities in the future." Similarly, non-rapid responders are recognizing the necessity for agile responses in emergent crises. Both emphasize swift responsiveness, viewing 'quick' as a flexible concept rather than a precise quantitative measure of time. They perceive rapid response as a tool to be integrated within a comprehensive, far-reaching strategic vision for feminist funds.

Feminist funds understand that the nature of rapid-onset crises means funders must disperse resources quickly and on a large scale, a contrast to their typical funding approach. Grassroots feminist actors tend to also be smaller in size which also limits their ability to respond at large scales during crises. However, the majority of today's

crises are protracted, making it possible to provide quality funding for feminist movements through different models, strategically reducing long-term causes of fragility and reaching marginalized populations vulnerable to crises. Whether for rapid response or not, feminist funds invest in movements and their actors, prioritizing a movement-centered approach to crisis response. As a feminist funder said: “We have to do it with care, because care is a political paradigm that shifts how we think of life and our future.” Feminist funds provide resources that focus on care and healing at the heart of crisis response, enabling movements to address structural harm exacerbated by crises and transform the crisis response paradigm to one centered on collective wellbeing and regeneration.

Channeling Resources to Feminist Grassroots Movements

Feminist funds provide flexible support for movements and grassroots responses to crises. In dismantling the binary between human rights and humanitarian crises, feminist funds do not explicitly support conventional humanitarian needs, with some citing a political principle that there are already institutions resourced for this work. With few resources at their disposal, it is not a strategic intervention for them to support humanitarian assistance. They advocate for a collaborative approach that instills accountability and recognizes the responsibility of development and humanitarian agencies designed and resourced to respond to large-scale needs.³¹ Feminist grassroots movements should not be burdened with interventions they are not equipped to handle, and most importantly, absolve the system from their responsibility. Feminist funds advocate for increased grassroots access to resources, recognizing that locally led responses have transformative value in building a more just, equitable world. The spectrum of funded areas extends to supporting crisis response strategies discussed earlier and actively shaping narratives, advocating for transformative change, increased resources, policy change, and strengthening movements’ health.

³¹ Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action. (2015). The State of the Humanitarian System. ALNAP Study. London: ALNAP/ODI; United Nations, 2005, Humanitarian Response Review. Available here: <https://sohs2015.alnap.org/#what-is-this-system>

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Emergency Livelihoods and Relocation

Feminist funds offer crucial support to sustain livelihoods and protect human rights defenders, often neglected in crisis discourse and under-resourced. Financial aid covers basic necessities and living expenses, providing rental assistance or stipends to alleviate financial strain during heightened risk situations. For instance, rapid responders like the UAF Sisterhood and Reconstruction Women's Fund provide small grants as urgent financial support for severe violations of women's and gender-diverse people's human rights. They also support needs like security and protection, allowing defenders to relocate, pursue safe spaces, evacuate, and meet health and subsistence needs.

Care and Healing Work

Multiple feminist funds have integrated care into their strategic frameworks, operations, and grantmaking priorities. They fund initiatives offering healing spaces, access to healers and facilitators, communal houses and farms, mental health services, trauma-informed initiatives, and holistic support for activists and human rights defenders during and beyond crises. These initiatives prioritize community care, healing practices, and spaces for rejuvenation and collective care for activists and defenders.

Advocacy and Campaigns

Advocacy is a critical strategy where feminist funds support movements by amplifying women and LGBTQI+-led work in institutional spaces. They leverage their institutional partnerships and positions within the philanthropy and humanitarian ecosystem to advance these efforts.³² They also lead political and media visibility campaigns to seize crises as opportunities of transformative change.

Skills and Capacity

Ensuring the safety and empowerment of activists and crisis-affected organizations is a top priority. Funds contribute crucially by offering digital security tools, cybersecurity training, encrypted communication resources, and other capacity-building

³² For example, read about MADRE's advocacy at the International Criminal Court that led to a groundbreaking outcome for gender justice and feminist movements, available here: <https://www.madre.org/gender-persecution/>

opportunities in areas such as advocacy, media, finance, and more, significantly enhancing their capabilities and resilience.

Movement-Building Work

Feminist funds create space for convenings, workshops, and exchanges that link diverse movements, fostering solidarity and a resilient feminist ecosystem. They support the creation of crucial hubs for discussions, shared learning, and collaborative strategy development.

Learning, Knowledge and Documentation

Feminist funds prioritize funding initiatives centered on learning, knowledge acquisition, and documentation, particularly in crisis contexts. They actively support initiatives aimed at documenting experiences, capturing lessons learned, and highlighting best practices amid crises. This involves funding research, publications, and digital platforms dedicated to sharing knowledge and amplifying voices from affected communities. Many feminist funds are also investing in their own learning and documentation and collaborating to contribute to the transformation of the funding ecosystem (outlined in more detail in the following section).

Constructing the Infrastructure

The feminist funding ecosystem contains crucial infrastructure to orchestrate and enact a feminist approach to crisis response. It comprises an intricate support system to sustain the garden of feminist crisis response, nurturing its roots and providing the fertile ground for growth and resilience. Feminist funds recognize that building a robust feminist crisis response using infrastructure that is primarily geared towards business as usual (top-down, depoliticized resources, etc.) is no longer possible. One thread connecting all the elements that make up a feminist infrastructure for crisis response is collective action and addressing it truly as an ecosystem rather than individual organizational capacities.

Increasing Resources

Feminist funds highlight the pressing need for increased funding in gender justice work overall, especially in crisis response. Feminist movements remain significantly

underfunded, manifesting in two critical ways: the inadequate resourcing of feminist funds as institutions dedicated to supporting movements and, consequently, the underfunding of grassroots gender justice movements. The existing limited resources allocated to feminist movements have strained the capacity of certain feminist funds to respond strategically and proactively to crises.³³

With around **US\$30.9B** in annual funding for humanitarian assistance, **less than five per cent** is reaching feminist grassroots organizations—**failing to reach those at the forefront** of and with the wisdom to support crisis response.³⁴

Even when resources are made available, the relationship between funders and feminist organizations lacks meaningful and sustainable dynamics because funders often approach feminist grassroots as implementers rather than leaders spearheading the change they advocate for.³⁵ The pool and type of resources allocated for this crucial work falls woefully short of meeting the needs and addressing the gaps that persist for feminist movements responding to crises.³⁶

³³ Dolker, T. (2021). Where is the Money for Feminist Organizing? Association for Women's Rights in Development: https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/AWID_Research_WITM_Brief_ENG.pdf; and Women's Refugee Commission. (2021). Understanding Past Experiences to Strengthen Feminist Responses to Crises and Forced Displacement.

<https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/research-resources/understanding-past-experiences-to-strengthen-feminist-responses-to-crises-and-forced-displacement/>

³⁴ Development Initiatives. (2021). Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2021.

<https://devinit.org/resources/global-humanitarian-assistance-report-2021/executive-summary/>; and Njeri, S., and Daigle, M. (2022). 'How women have led local humanitarian responses during Covid-19.'

<https://odi.org/en/insights/how-women-have-led-local-humanitarian-responses-during-covid-19/>

³⁵ Women's Refugee Commission. (2022). Toward Feminist Place-Based Responses to Forced Displacement.

<https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Toward-feminist-place-based-responses.pdf>

³⁶ For instance, the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF), established to support grassroots women's organizations, received 512 proposals from women's groups in Asia. A promising vehicle, the Fund is still constrained by small budgets and high demand for support. See the Report of the United Nations Secretary-General on Women, Peace and Security, September 25 2020.p33, available here: <https://undocs.org/en/S/2020/946> See also: Gender in Humanitarian Action. August 2020. Closing the Funding Gap for Women-Focused Organizations Responding to COVID-19 in Asia and the Pacific. p4:

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/GiHA%20Gender%20and%20Funding%20in%20COVID-19.pdf>; and Care. (2021). Time for a Better Bargain: How the Aid System Shortchanges Women and Girls in Crisis. p20.

https://care.at/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Final_She-Leads-in-Crisis-Report_3_24.21.pdf

Moreover, feminist funds engaged in rapid response have underscored the imperative to develop a more robust infrastructure for swift and prepared grantmaking. A funder aptly noted that the ecosystem lacks an understanding that rapid response grantmaking extends beyond reactivity; it necessitates pre-crisis preparedness. In reality, the number of proactive crisis grants remains minimal and fails to align with the feminist comprehension of crises as structural and systemic issues—not isolated incidents addressable through small, one-time grants. Even so, grassroots experience the nature of grantmaking within the feminist funding system as competitive. Feminist funds acknowledge that for feminist crisis response to be genuinely responsive, it's imperative to transcend the competitive reality and the hand-to-mouth approach.

Preparedness and Alertness

In talking about the emerging concept of preparedness and what it entails, a feminist funder said: “The signs are always there. Grassroots are always talking about when a crisis will spill over, they mobilize and start shifting focus before we even declare it as a crisis. Funds have to listen to the alert.” Feminist funds face challenges in their response model, impeding the realization of their potential and the shift from reactive to proactive and anticipatory approaches. These funds lack the capacity to activate and enhance existing infrastructure, preventing their grantmaking from fully aligning with the principles of feminist crisis response. Funds recognize the need to develop channels for actively engaging with grassroots voices, establishing a responsive system that heeds these early warnings.

For instance, while many funds have established advisory networks and early warning systems to prepare for crisis responses, these mechanisms often lack adequate political and operational support. Despite their existence, these mechanisms don't constitute a robust framework for foresight, predicting potential crisis points, and deploying resources swiftly. Their effectiveness is limited due to insufficient political and operational capacities.

Politically, certain issues and regions receive the majority of resources for community diagnosis, trend analysis, and forecasting tools, neglecting other contexts that remain

overlooked and under-resourced.³⁷ For example, in the Sudan crises, resource mobilization and the establishment of a coordination mechanism—similar to those deployed in other contexts like Afghanistan or Ukraine—have not been undertaken by the feminist funding community. The mobilization that ensued later came from Black feminists convened by the Black Feminist Fund, precisely because of the lack of engagement from the larger feminist funds. The feminist funding community struggles to break its inertia and address certain crises adequately.

Operationally, internal structures and policies within some feminist funds—such as application procedures, due diligence, and approval committees—prolong the process, missing the window for proactive actions based on anticipatory capabilities. Feminist funds need agile and responsive internal structures that match their politics of resourcing; a structure that expedites decision-making during crisis or shifts it altogether into the hands of the movement. To clarify, rapid response mechanisms are not set up for the longer term infrastructure issues identified.

Philanthropic Advocacy

Feminist funds have grasped the urgency of constructing an infrastructure dedicated to philanthropic advocacy, a crucial avenue to influence funders and advocate for support in crisis response. While numerous global and regional feminist funds actively engage in philanthropic advocacy to varying degrees, a key challenge persists in uniting feminist funds as a cohesive ecosystem, leveraging their collective strengths and positions within the philanthropic landscape. The overarching goal of philanthropic advocacy, as stressed by feminist funds, is not just to secure crisis response support and resources but also to sensitize funders by heightening awareness, articulating feminist political analyses, and disseminating firsthand feminist experiences.

Despite concerted efforts, significant gaps and challenges continue to mark the landscape of philanthropic advocacy. There is a pressing need for a more coordinated approach among funds, the development of unified strategies, and the establishment of consistent mechanisms for collaborative action. Moreover, sustaining funder engagement, reconciling diverse priorities, and navigating the complexities across

³⁷ For example, read UAF Africa's analysis of the response mobilization for Sudan. (2023). Available here: <https://www.uaf-africa.org/sudan-conflict-accelerating-feminist-funding-as-a-crisis-response-strategy/>

different contexts pose ongoing hurdles for feminist funds in their philanthropic advocacy endeavours.

Coordination Within the Feminist Funding Ecosystem

Feminist funds identify coordination as a cornerstone in constructing a strategic and unified infrastructure. As one funder aptly put it, “Coordination is very critical because in the absence of a coordinated response from feminist funds, they [philanthropic and humanitarian ecosystems] hear different things from different ones of us. That gives them permission to ignore all of us.” This necessity for coordination exists not only within the close-knit ecosystem of feminist funds but also across the broader philanthropic and humanitarian landscapes. For example, the UAF Sisterhood coordinates together on philanthropic advocacy and fundraising. Other feminist funds see a strategic opportunity in establishing a feminist framework for crisis response by fostering collaborative spaces among feminist funds and human rights advocates, who often operate in similar spheres with overlapping partnerships. This collaborative approach also seeks to fortify the position of feminist funds in advocating for increased support in crisis response, serving as a buffer against specific funder demands. This unified response has the potential to lead to more cohesive interactions with funders, facilitating more efficient and effective engagement aligned with the objectives and priorities of feminist funds in crisis response initiatives.

Effective coordination involves fostering ongoing dialogue among feminist funds to overcome barriers, establish efficient feedback mechanisms, and maintain open lines of communication. Many funds acknowledge the urgent need to improve coordination, eliminate duplication, develop a shared understanding of diverse contexts, and enhance synergies within the ecosystem. Concrete steps proposed by feminist funds include implementing shared templates within the Prospera Network, a global network of autonomous women’s and feminist funds. These aim to streamline application and reporting structures, allowing feminist partners to submit existing reports prepared for other funders, easing the burden on both feminist organizations and funds, fostering efficiency and clarity. Additionally, feminist funds advocate for establishing a centralized system for references and due diligence shared among feminist funds involved in crisis response. This institutionalized system aims to optimize the process,

ensuring consistency and speed in evaluating potential partnerships or funding recipients.

Documentation and Learning

Feminist funds prioritize documentation and learning within their organizations, investing resources to develop robust internal frameworks. The aim is to facilitate learning across the ecosystem by distilling insights from grantmaking, advocacy, and partner experiences and impacts. As an initial step in establishing the documentation infrastructure, feminist funds have devised internal policies and protocols. They focus on creating tools and enhancing capacity for documentation, focusing on movement-oriented strategies. They've also refined strategic frameworks, improving comprehension of the evolving dynamics in feminist crisis response. Importantly, feminist funds actively amplify diverse feminist narratives through research, knowledge production, and conceptual frameworks.³⁸ This knowledge development strengthens the feminist funding ecosystem and its infrastructure. However, challenges persist regarding sharing learnings and transitioning toward a collective learning approach. This limitation curtails collective learning potential and impedes the utilization of collective wisdom to strengthen feminist approaches to crises.

Navigating Crises: Concluding Thoughts

This research reveals the multifaceted ways in which grassroots feminists engage with crises, offering diverse perspectives that highlight the intricate political nature of defining 'crisis'. Rather than a singular interpretation, a nuanced analysis of drivers and structural conditions provides a more comprehensive framework for comprehending the unfolding and disproportionate impacts of crises on marginalized communities. Crises are compounded, structural, intersectional, and fundamentally political.

³⁸ See, for instance, 'Global Resistance to Anti-gender Opposition' (2023) by Astraea Foundation: <https://s3.amazonaws.com/astraea.production/app/asset/uploads/2023/10/Global-Resistance-to-Anti-gender-Opposition-2023-Full-Report.pdf>; Shaw, J. et al. (2022). Healing Justice as a Framework for Feminist Activism in Africa, UAF Africa: <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/17599>; FRIDA The Young Feminist Fund, Tales of Roma Women's Resistance: <https://youngfeministfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Tales-of-Roma-Womens-Resistance.pdf>; Urgent Action Funds. (2023). How can we ground ourselves in care and dance our revolution?: https://rootingcare.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/FAU_RootingCare_en.pdf; and Count Me In! Consortium, CMI! Extractives Toolkit: https://www.mamacash.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/behind_the_scenes_of_extractives_2.pdf

Grassroots feminists have transcended the false categories between humanitarian crises and other types of crises. The research emphasizes the unique contributions of feminist approaches to crisis: the act of naming crises serves as a potent political instrument, capable of revealing obscured and structural crises that were concealed for a long time. As our conceptual framework broadens, it uncovers the interconnected and intersectional essence of feminist movements. Rooted deeply within their communities, grassroots feminists extend their work far beyond civil and political rights activism. They embody various roles – teachers, journalists, queer and disability activists, environmental defenders, writers, thinkers, and Indigenous leaders – forming intricate networks within feminist communities.

Grassroots feminists act as frontline responders during crises, assuming transformative roles within these challenging situations. Unlike the conventional depiction of crisis responders as external entities, feminists operate within their communities, offering nuanced and context-sensitive responses because of this proximity. This feminist approach operates across various realms—public and private, national and global—while considering short, medium, and long-term timelines.

A feminist crisis response is inherently intersectional, delving into systemic vulnerabilities while centering the community to confront structural injustices collectively. Visionary, it acknowledges the potential of present interventions to reshape the future, while its core focus remains on dismantling exploitative systems and violence. These unwavering pillars anchor feminist responses to crises, transcending mere immediate relief strategies. Beyond superficial wound-patching, feminist responses weave a fabric of holistic support, recognizing that surviving storms demands more than emergency aid. From mobilizing solidarity to nurturing safe spaces, feminist movements pioneer alternative methods of response and regeneration. Feminists actively lay the groundwork for communities to thrive, extending beyond reactivity to promote and construct just societies.