

RESOURCES FOR WOMEN; WOMEN AS RESOURCES

A research brief from VOICE's report *We Must Do Better: A Feminist Assessment of the Humanitarian Aid System's Support of Women- and Girl-Led Organizations during the COVID-19 Pandemic*



INTRODUCTION

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have been immense, with long-term repercussions and social consequences. The crisis has triggered the largest global recession since the Great Depression. Nearly all countries have instituted lockdowns or curfews at various stages; global supply chains have been disrupted; commercial travel has declined; and the closure of educational institutions continues. Globally, the shape of work and social lives has been altered in ways that could not have been foreseen.

These extreme changes have had specific and critical implications for women and girls. In August 2020, as part of VOICE's work in centering and amplifying the voices of women and girls, we initiated the *We Must Do Better* research series, with the aim of creating space for women and girls to share their own experiences and perspectives on the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first report, *We Must Do Better*, is an overarching feminist assessment of the experiences of women and girls — and the organizations they lead — during the COVID-19 pandemic. It looks at their lives holistically to see how the pandemic has impacted their organizations and communities and how humanitarian responders engage with them, if at all. We invited 200 feminist organizations and individual women and girls in 41 countries to share their experiences during the pandemic and speak of their needs. The work sought to understand how their organizations are being affected and the ways in which they are — or are not — being supported.

We asked about their frustrations and how to alleviate the burdens they carry. We looked at how gender inequalities manifest in crisis and how the pandemic has affected the violence they face.

This series of research briefs takes a more in-depth look at the themes identified in the original report, exploring more concretely the following areas:

- Who Cares for the Carers?
- Resources for Women; Women as Resources
- Adapting Programming in the Context of COVID-19
- The Value of Women's Work

Across all of the themes, the research illustrates how precarious progress has been towards gender equity; it has become painfully visible that women and girls have not so much realized their rights within patriarchal contexts, but had been granted concessions which have been quickly withdrawn in the face of a global crisis. While COVID-19 may not discriminate, families, communities, governments and the machinery of aid certainly do. The themes explored in this series echo the long-term feminist analyses concerning the appropriation of women's work, the ways in which women are understood and situated as resources, and the lack of care and concern extended to women who are expected to provide care for others.

RESOURCES FOR WOMEN; WOMEN AS RESOURCES

The international humanitarian and aid communities have always worked in contexts where resources, funds and support systems are hard to come by, harder to build and hardest to distribute. The competing needs of numerous groups – all dire and all urgent – are complex to parse through and prioritize. However, years of practice and scholarship have repeatedly shown the stark reality that women and girls tend to be not only the ones most impacted by humanitarian crises, but also the ones most egregiously neglected by donors and humanitarian agencies.

In addition, women and girls are expected to contribute to their homes and communities – an expectation held not only by their own families but also by many humanitarian agencies. Humanitarian agencies are not free from patriarchal norms, and they are as likely to see women as resources in their families and communities as the contexts within which they are operating. There is a reflexive focus on how women can support others around them, but extraordinarily little attention is paid toward understanding what resources or support women might need or actually providing this support. This view extends not only to individual women and girls themselves, but also to women-led organizations.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the extent of this attitude toward women and women-led organizations, while dealing a serious blow to what little progress has been made toward centering the needs of girls and women in programs, funding practices and policies. Unsurprisingly, the negative impacts of COVID-19 have been disproportionately harsh on women and girls. The pandemic has underscored the roles that women are expected to play in their families and communities. The last year and a half also saw a resurgence in the prevalence of patriarchal ideas and assumptions around women's duties and obligations within the household. Women's paid and unpaid labor has been simultaneously exploited more and valued

less. Consequently, the view that women are resources to be utilized extends beyond the individual level to also impact how women- and girl-led organizations have fared in the course of the pandemic.

VOICE's *We Must Do Better* report found that many women and girls have been relegated to household chores and caretaking responsibilities during the pandemic. With education and many forms of work outside the home no longer possible due to lockdowns and quarantines, women and girls are burdened with additional care work and domestic responsibilities. This is a particularly disquieting development for adolescent girls because their families are less likely to allow them to return to their educations once schools reopen. The pandemic is reinforcing patriarchal notions of a girl's place being in the house and encouraging the perception of women as resources to be utilized in the service of others – as opposed to human beings with their own dreams, ambitions and agency. These reactive roles also re-situate women and girls as dependent on the men around them financially and logistically, a dynamic that renders them very susceptible to abuse.



WHAT WOMEN AND GIRLS TOLD US

Organizations reported that many of their communities have witnessed a sudden rise in the number of early marriages. Young girls are being forced or coerced into marriage by their families because the economic devastation wrought by COVID-19 has pushed many families back into abject poverty; as a means to reduce the number of mouths to feed, families will often try to marry their daughters off. A women's disability rights organization in Somalia reported: "We have seen discrimination, domestic violence, FGM [female genital mutilation], forced and early marriages, sexual exploitation, and a shortage of jobs." This is corroborated by another women's organization in Uganda, who said: "There is an increase in sexual and economic violence. [Women and girls] are seeking protection from abusers because safe spaces are either closed or inaccessible. There is also a lot of violence stemming from partners not providing for the household, leading to an increase in struggles for assets and subduing of women to prove power over them."

The homes into which these adolescent girls marry often consider them a source of labor. Specifically, young girls and women are valued for their reproductive labor, increasing their vulnerability to sexual and intimate partner violence. Furthermore, VOICE's *We Must Do Better* survey found that in most countries, women not only perform the overwhelming majority of domestic work but are also at the forefront of many essential healthcare services. This increases their own health risks without a proportional increase in remuneration they receive for their work. Women and girls have found themselves in an impossible predicament of a sharp rise in both domestic work and, in many cases, an increasingly risky professional situation.

This perception of women and girls as mere conduits for the service of others extends to how large humanitarian organizations and international donors have dealt with women- and girl-led organizations around the world.

Respondents to VOICE's *We Must Do Better* report said that many of their organizations received no additional support from their donors but were expected to continue their work – and in some cases even widen their scope to respond to the pandemic. Most received no additional funding to cover items like personal protective equipment (PPE) or to compensate for the enormous personal health risk women were expected to take. In addition, only 22% of respondents said that they were able to access continued funding for their programs; most others had faced outright rejections to their pleas for funding or were still awaiting further updates from funders, facing an uncertain future.



A women's rights organization in Malawi reported: "Many potential donors canceled the granting process due to COVID-19 and they haven't opened any other opportunities yet. One of [our] donors had already approved their grant, but it took more than two months to have the funds transferred." Another women's rights organization from Bangladesh reported that "Our organization had no funds from 15 February until 15 September 2020."

There is a vicious cycle in action. Women were and continue to be disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 because they already lacked adequate access to economic resources. By further withholding or cutting off access to even the meager resources that they did have, the pandemic has shed an unforgiving light on the ways in which women,

and the organizations they lead, are consistently shortchanged – including by those who claim to champion them. Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, many funders still function under the assumption that men will eventually share their resources with girls and women. As such, many of the programs and policies implemented to ameliorate the impacts of COVID-19 have been designed with men as the central and often exclusive beneficiaries. This erasure of women from recovery measures is also a result of the view that women's work is a natural and inexhaustible source for the greater good of their families and communities. Instead of acknowledging women's unique needs and providing them with more resources, women's immense contributions to their homes and communities are held up as evidence that women do not need resources because they *are* the resource.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

The central takeaway that respondents left us with is the fact that when women are viewed merely as instruments to be deployed for the wellbeing and progress of others, their basic and indelible humanity is disregarded. Their rights, needs and choices are sidelined, if not completely ignored. More worryingly, by demoting women to what they can provide and produce, the humanitarian and international development sectors often fail to credit the skills, knowledge and intellectual rigor that women and girls bring to the organizations they build and lead. When donor agencies and humanitarian organizations simply consider women and girls as field agents who execute programs and policies designed by others, they fail to invite women to the table as equal partners. Women and girls who lead organizations on the ground are rarely consulted by larger agencies to help plan programs, direct resources and identify their needs. This is both a disservice to women and girls and a chief cause of how existing inequities are exacerbated.

Women and girls and their organizations find themselves situated in an impossible position.

They can clearly see the needs around them, and their traditional roles are to take care of others; in the context of a terrifying global pandemic, it is impossibly hard-hearted – unthinkable – to refuse to extend care to those around them.



Organizations that have grown out of activism cannot refuse to try to meet the needs of the women and girls they serve. In the face of this commitment, they find themselves hugely exploited, with their labor, knowledge and skills appropriated and deployed without resource or support as an indirect basis of the humanitarian response.

Programs are designed and implemented on an assumption that women will provide care and will voluntarily provide services and support in their families and communities, regardless of their own needs. Aligned with this, there is also an assumption the women- and girl-led organizations will 'find a way' to sustain their already under-funded services without additional resources. These organizations and services are not recognized as needing to be resourced; rather, their foundations in 'activism'

confine them – in the eyes of the international community – to working 'voluntarily', out of their 'passion' for their work. That this is an exploitation of women is not considered relevant. Within the patriarchal expectations of women's 'selflessness', any demand or request for resources is understood as inappropriate, self-serving and a betrayal of 'activism', undermining still further the work of women- and girl-led organizations.

The unpaid work of women- and girl-led organizations in humanitarian crises has never been costed or valued financially. It is, however, a parallel process to the ways in which women's domestic and reproductive labor is an invisible contribution to GDP. To truly acknowledge the rich and diverse set of capabilities women bring to the humanitarian field, aid and humanitarian agencies must commit to investing resources that empower women to build and effectively employ those skills.

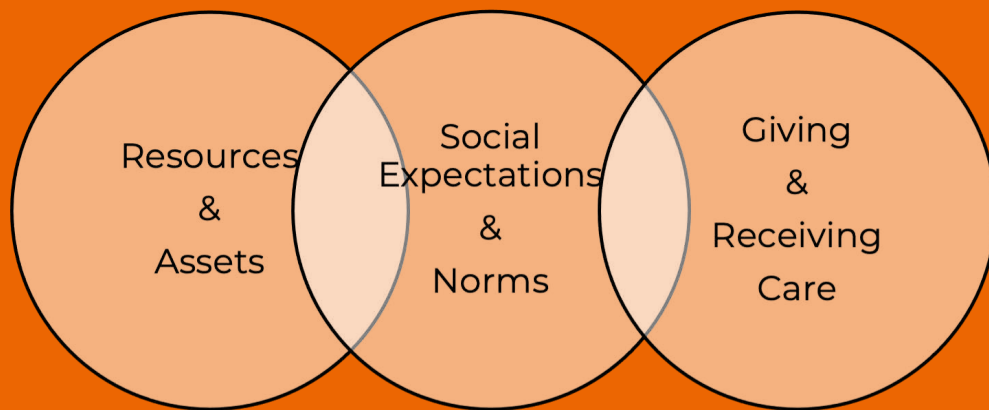
DEMANDS

- **All humanitarian agencies should unequivocally commit to recognizing women as human beings who need resources, and are not resources themselves.** Services for women and girls must be prioritized, and resources must be designated to them to meet their needs. This means prioritizing sexual and reproductive health services, gender-based violence (GBV) response services, and access to and control over livelihood opportunities and resources. Women must not be disappeared into 'the household' while men retain control of distributed aid, whether food, non-food items or any other necessity. Distribution of resources and opportunities must prioritize women, in recognition of their own needs as well as their responsibility for providing for others.
- International organizations must recognize that in most parts of the world, women are socially expected to care for other people in their homes, families and communities. Women are lauded for being 'selfless' and encouraged to disregard their own needs. **Humanitarian organizations must not take advantage of this tendency and must thoughtfully design programs that don't rely on women to provide unpaid or underpaid labor.** Women's abilities and time cannot be instrumentalized to build cheaper programs under the guise of benefitting the larger community; it is integral that humanitarian agencies make this a codified core principle of their programming to ensure that their donors understand this. The idea that women should voluntarily provide disproportionate and unpaid labor to serve their communities is harmful, and international organizations must be taking all possible measures not to appropriate or exploit women's labor and skills.
- It is vital that humanitarian aid organizations bolster support of women- and girl-led organizations that focus on women's issues in times of crisis. **For too long, women and girls and their organizations have been expected to run programs and deliver results on shoestring budgets and grossly inadequate resources. Instead of upholding this status quo, humanitarian aid agencies must recognize this pattern and provide women with the resources and support they need to ensure that they can run their organizations and live their lives with dignity and choice.** Funding and resources for women-led organizations must be ring-fenced from the beginning and used to ensure that these organizations are sustained.

LINKS WITH OTHER BRIEFS

Across the research, participating organizations identified resources and assets, social expectations and norms, and giving and receiving care as central core issues to the challenges they face. It is clear that none of the issues are separate from the others, and as such, none of them can be addressed discretely. The resource challenges faced by women- and girl-led organizations are exacerbated due to the pandemic; they are also integrally related to whose needs are more valued and recognized, as well as who is held responsible for meeting those needs. COVID-19 is a health crisis, and health crises happen in socio-political contexts; health and health issues are intimately connected to who is expected to provide care, and for whom.

Women- and girl-led organizations are finding themselves to be the final line of defense for women who are attempting to replace their precarious incomes and sustain themselves and their children. They are also trying to meet the needs of women and girls suffering from predictable increases in violence. At the same time, there is virtually no care for the women providing the services, all of whom are exposed to the same risks as the women they serve.



TO READ MORE

Visit WWW.VOICEAMPLIFIED.ORG to read the series of *We Must Do Better* briefs:

- **Who Cares for the Carers?**
- **Resources for Women; Women as Resources**
- **Adapting Programming in the Context of COVID-19**
- **The Value of Women's Work**



ABOUT VOICE

VOICE is a cutting-edge feminist organization working to end VAWG in conflict, crisis, and disaster settings around the world. We are a team of skilled humanitarians with extensive experience working on VAWG in emergency contexts, and we have seen that the humanitarian aid sector itself has consistently failed to meet the needs of women and girls in these settings. We believe that the industry must change to deliver on its promise to protect them; we also know that

they are the best judges of what is needed, though they are routinely ignored by those who hold the power in aid organizations.

We are working to help meet the needs of women- and girl-led organizations in a growing number of countries, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, the United States, Venezuela, and Yemen.