THE VALUE OF WOMEN'S WORK

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*

AMPLIFYING WOMEN AND GIRLS IN CRISES

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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, and 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 organi ations 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; what impact lockdowns and economic downturns have on women and girls; 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 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, communities, families, 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.

THE VALUE OF WOMEN'S WORK

This research brief considers the ways in which the work of women is valued – or not – in the contexts of emergencies, and what this means for the kinds of programmatic interventions that are essential in order to support not only sustained service delivery but the women and girls who are working and volunteering in those services. This is integrally connected to the analyses of women as care-givers, the ways in which women and girls are understood as resources in their families and communities, and the reliance of the humanitarian architecture on the unpaid and invisible work of women and girls, all of which are described in the accompanying briefs.

This brief is concerned with understanding the vital but deeply undervalued, invisible and unpaid work taken on by women and girls that enables the undertaking of 'productive' work by others. It examines the value of women's work, and how – despite often being relied on for information and to provide services – women-led groups and organizations are still undervalued and overlooked in terms of tangible support.

Women- and girl-led organizations described how the wider humanitarian sector relies heavily on them to provide gender-based violence (GBV) services, to sustain grassroots networks and alliances, and to provide information and guidance to communities – just to name a few – while failing to recognize the value of this labor.

WHAT WOMEN AND GIRLS TOLD US

Throughout responses to the *We Must Do Better* survey, women- and girl-led organizations consistently described similar themes across regions and countries:

"We barely have time for our families because you are needed to respond almost everywhere hence we do get burn[t] out sometimes."

"It has been extremely difficult for our female staff to work from home as many of them do not have access to quiet space to work from home. Although the program helped each staff have access to computers and internet at home, but many of them do not have access to power." (Individual response, Kabul, Afghanistan)

In terms of work, women talked overwhelmingly about the increasing demands on them in light of the pandemic. They found themselves more 'in demand' than ever and yet less supported at the same time.

The impact of the additional demands on them were not recognized or understood as additional work: "The way we did everything had to be modified, we are used to holding workshops and face-to-face activities, organizing everything to be able to give quality trainings in a virtual way increased the workload. As well as the follow-ups on the psychological and economic situation of the users of the association, and the search for budgets in order to be able to provide financial and food aid to those who needed it most."

Responses described the sharp increase in the violence faced by women and girls that their organizations were called upon to respond to and provide support for – including legal, psycho-social, mental, case work management, safe space and other forms of support. Beyond violence against women and girls, they described the need and demand for capacity building and entrepreneurship training to support women facing financial difficulty, to distribute hygiene supplies, to provide comprehensive sexuality education and awareness, and other similar needs.

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This has placed immense pressure on women as individuals within their organizations, all while they continue to navigate their complex home situations with increased care responsibilities. At the same time, this additional work is not valued by their families, their communities or the humanitarian infrastructure.

"It is a big lie; all that they say is that they are going to give aid to mothers who are heads of households and adolescent mothers. It is a facade they do to show that they really helping, but it's not like that."

The responses shared by women were sharply telling in that very few women talked about the fear of contracting COVID-19 except when considering who would take care of them and fulfill their work obligations if they were to get sick. Instead, the focus was on the burdens of work they were grappling with, in the face of the seemingly insurmountable challenge of lack of resources. When asked what services and activities they were looking to expand, the answers primarily centered around basic needs and service provision – the bare minimum.

Women also described a debilitating sense of loneliness and lack of support due to lockdowns and fears of spreading and/or contracting COVID-19. They have become isolated from their support networks (such as parents, friends, families, co-workers and community-based organizations they might have reached out to for support, financial or otherwise, before the pandemic), which in turn has had a drastic impact on their mental health and well-being.

Women shared their need to be supported in carrying out more sustainable and long-term work "and no repetitive projects focusing women's roles on house chores." They talked of the struggle to provide services and support virtually, something that was not always effective or possible, making it difficult and in some cases impossible to fulfill the demands being made of them. Others talked of the struggle to relocate funding that had already been received due to inflexibility on the part of funders, as well as the inability to access more funding for unplanned expenses such as personal protective equipment (PPE) and hygiene equipment.

Many saw a loss of the gains made on women's rights through their work and highlighted the lack of funding available for them to access. They discussed the difficulties in mastering new forms of work, lack of face-to-face communication with colleagues, and the psychological struggle stemming from the uncertainty of when things will recover. All of these concerns spoke to how invisible and unvalued women's work has been in this crisis, both domestically in their households and more publicly in their communities and by humanitarian actors.

"Because our organization does not have core fund or reserve fund, the number of our project personnel [has] decreased after closure of some projects."

A further issue raised includes the failure of the international response to integrate the concerns of women and girls – both as individuals and as organizations focused on the needs of women and girls. There has been little recognition of their work and no value attached to it within the policies and programming priorities, reinforcing the sense that their work is both invisible and effectively disposable. This kind of dismissal of the work of women and girls is profoundly dispiriting to them, as it indicates a serious lack of value given to both them and their work.

"The emergency response has not been able to mainstream gender in the fight against COVID 19."

"Some didn't provide emergency services due to fear of COVID-19 while others (health care providers) passed snarky comments when they did."

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Women talked about a myriad of gendered issues they faced in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, including domestic violence, increased burdens of unpaid care work, lack of access to information, struggles to access health services, re-allocation of women's health services to more general COVID-19 response, and increased job loss and economic insecurity. However, women's needs, perspectives and experiences have been largely ignored and sidelined from the emergency response to COVID-19. It was also noticeable that for some respondents, the questions themselves became a space for women to talk about the issues they were facing, with no mention of support; that the survey itself was the only place women had to talk about this was indicative of the lack of value attributed to their work. Others described how women's issues were treated as secondary to the needs of the pandemic, and women's organizations were unable to fill in the gaps to support women's issues due to a lack of resources.

Women-led groups and organizations reported having been mainly ignored and sidelined in networks and decision-making processes throughout the pandemic, not viewed as equal partners who have skills, expertise and insights to contribute – a further indication of the ways in which their work is deeply undervalued. The majority referenced "big fish" like the World Health Organization (WHO) that have been instrumental in shaping response processes. Of the groups they were a part of, women described how rarely the leaders of women's organizations were consulted, if at all, and how tokenistic and surface-level the existing 'consultations' have been. Some referenced using personal channels and networks to be able to gain access and have their voices heard; however, the majority described the ineffectiveness of the limited inclusion that did happen. "The agenda is drawn by the donors and the government, then the women's groups are called in to rubber stamp," said one respondent. Another reported: "In our case [it was] through personal channels, by Internet mailing list." Significantly few respondents described a meaningful engagement in the planning and strategizing process; of those who did, international organizations were not referenced, as these took place at the local level.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

What is particularly saddening about these responses is the painful similarity to previous findings from past pandemics, such as Zika, SARS and Ebola. It should not be unexpected to realize that gendered dynamics continue to play out in situations of crisis and pandemic. As Conrad and Barker explain, "*illnesses are particularly embedded with cultural meaning – which is not directly derived from the nature of the condition – that shapes how society responds to those afflicted and influences the experience of that illness.*"[1] As we analyze these findings, we see just how true this is and yet how little we have learned from the past.

The increased demands on women's time and work both within and outside of the home is a stark example of the gendered imbalance in care work as a whole. While it is true that women tend to take up more caregiver responsibilities during crises and

pandemics – often at the expense of their health[2] – inequality in caregiving is not an issue limited to pandemics and crises alone. Women's labor is not viewed as valuable or 'productive,' and is instead only understood as an enabling process for others to do 'productive,' and thereby valued, work. Any value that is expressed is done through often patronizing language that glorifies and valorizes women's suffering and sacrifice, rather than tangible resources or support.

This, in turn, has a direct impact on how women prioritize their time and energy – and this is almost always done at the expense of their own health and safety. Women providing services and working in organizations to support women and girls find themselves caught in the crucible in both private and public domains: they are living the experiences in their own lives that they are trying to support other women around in their work, and they are expected to provide similar kinds of unpaid care both in their public work and within their private domains of family and community. In both of these spaces, their own needs are made invisible and disregarded; the parallel process of becoming resources in both environments takes a severe toll on the lives and well-being of women and girls.

Despite the clear evidencing that women and girls face gendered impacts from pandemics and other emergencies, their needs and specific issues are still not considered. The 'gender issue' is seen as separate from the mainstream operations of humanitarian aid, and the needs of women and girls within this context are not valued as a priority.

Be it the allocation of resources, the inclusion of women and girls in decision-making processes, or even space for them to share their struggles – their realities are side-lined and they are asked to wait their turn. This turn never comes, however, despite being highlighted over and over throughout the years. This is profoundly frustrating and reminds us of the minimal consideration given to this issue, despite the overwhelming evidence to show its importance. The exclusion of women's groups from networks, groups and decision-making processes also brings to light how international organizations and the United Nations rely on women-led organizations to relay information, provide GBV services, sustain women's groups and tell them what they should be doing, without translating this into any tangible processes or outcomes.

The central tenet of 'less money, more work' or 'do more with less' ran strongly through all of the responses given. The levels of demand on services have increased exponentially without the resources or support to change the modes of delivery in the context of the pandemic and the need for social distancing. Women whose levels of caregiving are increasing in their private lives are meeting similar demands for their skills and work in their public roles, with little or no support in either domain. An overwhelming number of women described their want and need to be more connected through networks and groups, which indicates extractivism from international NGOs and little work having been done over the years to make groups connected and self-sustainable. Women-led groups and organizations continue to be trapped in the project-funding cycle with no long-term capacity building and self-support being offered.

What is the value of women's work? According to these findings, it is little or none. Repeatedly throughout their responses, women shared how they are expected to give everything with nothing in return. They described the enormous emotional and physical burdens placed on them to hold everything together in a crisis, only to find themselves out in the cold when decisions are being made. Their needs and realities fail to be recognized time and time again, and indeed at the end of this pandemic, the 'new normal' might have them in a worse place than they were before.

The following are crucial and non-negotiable steps humanitarian aid organizations and donors must take as they continue to attempt to curb the damage caused in the wake of the pandemic:

DEMANDS

- **Include women- and girl-led groups in a meaningful and engaging way across all planning and advocacy efforts, focusing on resources, services and reducing isolation.**

- **Bring women's experiences and analyses to the attention of donors and those who can influence the shape and priorities of aid, and use practice-based evidence to support their demands.**

- **Ensure a feminist perspective and analysis is main-streamed throughout the entire humanitarian process, from planning to crisis interventions to post-crisis recovery.**

- **Create spaces and opportunities for women to talk about and analyze their experiences as women in both their private lives as well as in their public and working lives. Provide opportunity for them to consider together how their strategic needs and interests can be addressed.**

- **Reframe support and resources available to women's groups to avoid extractivism and ensure long-term sustainability and capacity building.**

- **Increase funding available to women-led organizations and groups, with a specific focus on flexible funding for grassroots and unregistered groups and collectives.**

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 absolute resistance to valuing the work of women in their personal and professional lives underpins the ways in which women are understood as a resource, without recognition of their own needs for care and support. This is deeply connected to the fundamentally patriarchal framing of women – and women's organizations – as infinitely available and the view of them as an apparently endless source of care, support and provision for others, at the same time that they are made invisible through the lack of value ascribed to them.

When the humanitarian architecture further instrumentalizes the work of women and women's organizations, it becomes both extractive and exploitative, further entrenching the disempowerment of women and women's work. The gains women have made over the last decades are revealed to be precarious concessions, rather than true realizations of their rights as human beings.
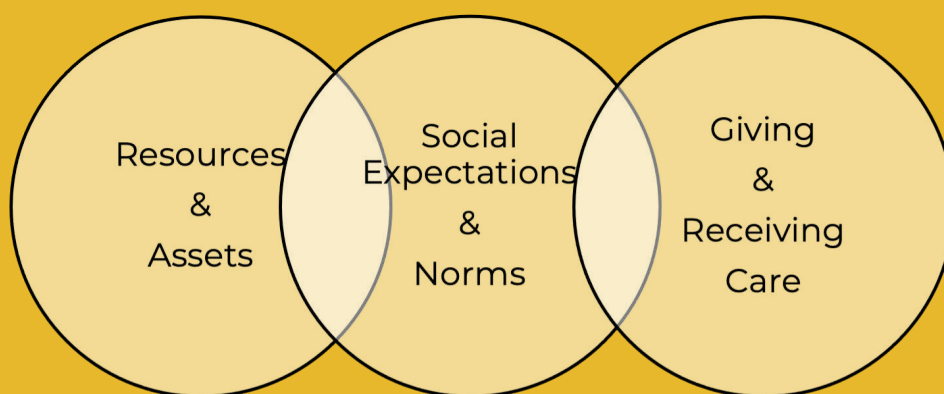
TO READ MORE

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

- o **Who Cares for the Carers?**

- o **Resources for Women; Women as Resources**

- o **Adapting Programming in the Context of COVID-19**

- o **The Value of Women's Work**

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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.

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