CAFI
CALL TO ACTION FIELD IMPLEMENTATION

REDEFINING RESILIENCE:

Strengthening Women-Led Organisations to Lead GBV Interventions in Crisis Situations

CAFI

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is dedicated to the unwavering courage and resilience of Women-Led Organisations tirelessly working on the frontlines of humanitarian emergencies. Your commitment to combatting gender-based violence, often in the most challenging circumstances, inspires hope and drives change.

To the women and girls whose voices guide and shape this work, and to the countless advocates, survivors, and allies who envision a world free from violence - this report is a tribute to your strength, vision, and leadership.

This report is shaped by diverse feminist perspectives from across the world, offering rich insights and collective wisdom that deepen our understanding and strengthen our resolve to drive meaningful change.

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Together, we can build a future where dignity, equality, and safety are rights afforded to all.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

AWO	Arab Women Organisation
BWA	Baghdad Women Association
CAFI	Call to Action Field Implementation
COJEFIL	Comité des Jeunes Femmes Leaders
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSW	Commission on the Status of Women
CTA	Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies
DFJ	Dynamique des Femmes Juristes
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
FFP	Feminist Foreign Policy
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GBV AoR	Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility
GENFAMI	Fundación para el Desarrollo en Género y Familia
GFFO	German Federal Foreign Office
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
HDA	Himaya Daeem Aataa
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
IM	Information Management
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
KII	Key Informant Interview
LAC	Latin America and the Caribbean
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UN Women	The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
WaSH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Promotion
WCA	West and Central Africa
WEO	Women Empowerment Organisation
WLO	Women-Led Organisation
WRLO	Women Refugee-Led Organisation

DEFINITIONS

In this report, we adopt the following definitions:

Local and national organisations: In line with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) definition, local and national organisations are types of local and national non-state actors (IASC, 2018). They are "organizations engaged in relief that are headquartered and operating in their own aid recipient country and which are not affiliated to an international non-governmental organisation (INGO)." Local organisations are non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or civil society organisations (CSOs) operating in a well-defined geographic location at the sub-national level, and they include community-based organisations (CBOs) and local faith-based organisations. National organisations are NGOs/CSOs operating in the entire aid recipient country. In this report we focus on local and national organisations working on addressing gender-based violence (GBV) in crisis settings.

Women-Led Organisations (WLOs): We align with the IASC definition of WLOs, whereby a WLO is "an organization with a humanitarian mandate and/or mission that is (1) governed or directed by women; or 2) whose leadership is principally made up of women, demonstrated by 50 per cent or more occupying senior leadership positions" (IASC, 2024b). WLOs are one type of national or local non-state actor. The IASC definition is a non-normative definition, that does not refer to the programmatic agenda and mission of an organisation. In this report we focus on WLOs working on addressing GBV in crisis settings, including organisations led by women with disabilities, women of diverse Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC), identities, women refugee-led organisations, and others.

Host governments: Host governments are national and sub-national government agencies, authorities, line ministries and state-owned institutions, in aid recipient countries (IASC, 2018).

Donors: We define donors as entities that provide financial resources, goods, or services to support humanitarian efforts. Donors provide bilateral aid in the form of flows directly to the recipient country, multilateral aid in the form of contributions to United Nations (UN) agencies working in the recipient country, or funding for civil society organisations working in aid-recipient countries.

International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs): INGOs are not based in an aid recipient country but carrying out operations in one or more aid recipient countries (IASC, 2018). However, some INGOs may establish a presence or base in aid recipient countries to better carry out their operations.

UN agencies: UN agencies are international organisations working with the UN. In this report we refer to UN agencies as those entities that deliver funds, programs and services, for GBV prevention, mitigation, and response, directly or through INGOs or WLOs operating in crisis settings.

International organisations: We use the terms 'international organisations' in line with the definition of the Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies (CTA) (CTA, 2022a). International organisations are UN agencies as well as The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), GBV Area of Responsibility (GBV AoR), The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and Elrha). ■

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report highlights the critical role of Women-Led Organisations (WLOs) in humanitarian action and exposes systemic barriers that undermine their ability to participate meaningfully and lead effectively. Despite their frontline efforts in addressing gender-based violence (GBV), WLOs remain critically underfunded, excluded from decision-making, and undervalued within a patriarchal humanitarian system. However, by taking bold and decisive actions, the international community can and must seize the opportunity to transform GBV prevention, mitigation and response, ensuring these efforts are more inclusive, effective, and sustainable.

1. Women-Led Organisations: Champions of Crisis Response, Yet Marginalised

WLOs are indispensable in delivering GBV prevention, mitigation and response during crises. They provide critical support, including psychosocial care, legal aid, and advocacy for systemic change. Despite their proven leadership, their contribution is undervalued, critically underresourced and they face tokenistic inclusion in decision-making processes as well as a lack of recognition for their expertise.

2. Unfulfilled Commitments and Weak Accountability

The humanitarian system has committed to strengthening the role of local organisations, including WLOs, through initiatives such as the Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies (CTA) and the Grand Bargain. However, progress remains slow, due to a lack of political will and insufficient accountability mechanisms. WLOs are often sidelined, struggling to meet burdensome compliance requirements, while international actors including international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) retain disproportionate control over resources and decisions.

3. Patriarchy at the Root of the Exclusion of WLOs

GBV is deeply structural, not incidental; it is both a cause and consequence of inequality between women and men. As a grave violation of human rights, addressing GBV requires actions that prioritise the autonomy and empowerment of women and girls in all their diversity. However, the humanitarian system itself mirrors patriarchal structures, perpetuating the systemic undervaluation of women's voices and leadership. This entrenched inequality systematically excludes WLOs from positions of power, restricts their access to resources, and marginalises their essential contributions. Without confronting these biases, meaningful progress in preventing and responding to GBV remains out of reach.

> "
> We've had to face sexism within the system. And to do this, you need to speak strong and loudly. You need to impose yourself as if you were a man. And I've found colleagues from the same system that call themselves feminists and represent the so-called feminist organisations… that say things like, we need to speak softer in coordination spaces. But I tell them I need to fight them, I need to face them. Because if not, they will not listen to me. Not only me, they will not listen to the voice of women."
>
> Representative of a WLO, CAFI partner

A Call to Transform GBV Prevention, Mitigation and Response

By taking bold actions, the international community has an opportunity to lead transformative change by challenging patriarchal norms that devalue women's voices and systematically exclude WLOs. The international community must do more to strengthen their own accountability, by establishing robust monitoring mechanisms to ensure commitments to localisation and gender equality are realised.

Alongside findings from original research and insights from WLOs gathered through interviews, a survey, and workshops, the report includes concrete recommendations from the WLOs, directed towards United Nations (UN) agencies, INGOs, donors and other WLOs, including:

1. **To ensure equitable partnerships**, UN agencies must work to rethink and re-design power structures to create genuinely inclusive decision-making platforms that intentionally break down barriers. They must support pathways for WLOs to take on leadership roles, including reserving permanent seats for WLOs in coordination structures.

2. **INGOs must recognise and rethink their own power**, rising up to the challenge of becoming true allies to WLOs, taking on more of the risk and sharing resources and advocacy platforms, to amplify WLOs' voices, visibility and representation in humanitarian fora.

3. **Donors must re-imagine their funding approaches** and provide multi-year, core and flexible funding, to enhance the sustainability, strategic growth and resilience of WLOs.

4. **Donors and UN agencies must establish robust monitoring mechanisms** across the humanitarian system - including for the CTA itself - to track their own commitments to GBV prevention, and WLO leadership.

5. **WLOs should continue to take collective action for meaningful participation**, consistently calling for and co-creating transparent systems that ensure WLOs' inclusion in humanitarian decision-making structures.

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> We see that the cluster and subcluster system invites WLOs for data collection, but there is no accountability, there is no follow-up with them, so they just get information from WLOs. But when it comes to acting together, fundraising, or even inviting them to be part of the real decision-making, they're not invited. And I think the context varies depending on the country and region."
>
> Representative of a WLO, CAFI partner

The path forward requires courage, collaboration, and an unwavering commitment to equity. By amplifying the leadership of WLOs, the international community can revolutionise GBV prevention, mitigation and response, creating a system that protects and empowers women and girls in the most vulnerable settings. This is not just a moral imperative but a transformative opportunity to ensure that humanitarian responses are grounded in the lived realities and leadership of women and girls on the frontlines. ■

DRIVING CHANGE: Advancing the Meaningful Participation of Women-Led Organisations in Emergencies

In the wake of natural disasters and human-made crises, Women-Led Organisations (WLOs) are lifelines for women and girls facing the escalating risks of gender-based violence (GBV), which often surge in such times of upheaval. Before, during, and after crises, these frontline champions provide vital services: safe shelters, medical care, legal aid, and psychosocial counseling. They foster hope and resilience through community outreach, awareness campaigns, and advocacy aimed at breaking the cycle of violence. Yet, despite their indispensable role in delivering safety and healing, WLOs are often sidelined — excluded from decision-making, underfunded, and denied the resources and recognition they need to lead transformative change. This report shines a light on their critical contributions and the urgent need to hear their voices and strengthen their influence in the fight against GBV.

Gender-Based Violence is a pervasive global issue that intensifies sharply during crises, making its prevention, mitigation, and response essential to every humanitarian effort. Yet, historically, it has not been treated as a lifesaving priority. To address this, a global initiative was launched in 2013 to transform how GBV is tackled in emergencies. The Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies (CTA) unites humanitarian actors, including WLOs, around a common goal: to ensure that survivors have access to safe and comprehensive support services while driving systemic change to prevent, mitigate and reduce GBV from the onset of every humanitarian response (CTA, 2022b). At its core, the CTA initiative strives to dismantle these barriers by embedding strong policies, frameworks, and accountability mechanisms into humanitarian action. The CTA Road Map (2021-2025) places particular emphasis on amplifying the role of women and girls in humanitarian decision-making and response, especially through WLOs, recognizing their critical role in creating sustainable solutions (CTA, n.d.). The Call to Action Field Implementation (CAFI) project, now in its second phase with funding from the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO), transforms this vision into action. By strengthening the role of WLOs through capacity sharing in GBV programming, advocacy, and leadership, CAFI contributes to frontline actors driving change toward safer, more inclusive humanitarian responses.

Ten years after the CTA was adopted, it is evident that its promises have not yet materialised fully in crisis settings, and a great deal of work is still needed to ensure the meaningful participation and leadership of WLOs in decision-making and coordination processes. Furthermore, funding gaps continue to impede the ability of WLOs to scale up GBV prevention, mitigation and response efforts.

In 2023, only 4.4 per cent of funding from Grand Bargain signatories reached local and national organisations, with a mere 0.6 per cent allocated directly to local organisations, of which WLOs likely only make up a small proportion, as a report from the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) initiative found (Rieger et al., 2024). This statistic is a stark reminder of the systemic neglect faced by local and national organisations, including WLOs, in the broader humanitarian financing landscape, despite growing international recognition of the critical role of WLOs in addressing GBV. Moreover, as highlighted at the Grand Bargain Annual Meeting in October 2023, many signatories report an inability to track funding flowing to WLOs, which results in a lack of transparency and accountability (Grand Bargain Secretariat, 2024).

The barriers to WLOs' meaningful participation are also reflected in the growing calls for an accountable and gender-responsive approach to humanitarian aid. The recent development of the IASC Policy on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls in Humanitarian Action, along with the ongoing work on an Accountability Framework to monitor progress against this policy, highlights the global shift towards prioritising gender equality in humanitarian action (IASC, 2024a). Yet, this policy's full potential will only be realised if it is effectively implemented at the field level, with WLOs playing a central role in its execution.

This report is a direct response to the urgent need to identify and address the barriers and enablers to the meaningful participation of WLOs in the planning, coordination, design, implementation, and evaluation of GBV prevention, risk mitigation, and response in humanitarian emergencies.

Based on consultations with WLOs from the CAFI networks in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), West and Central Africa (WCA), Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and Ukraine (see map), this report defines meaningful participation as the inclusion of WLOs as agents of change in humanitarian coordination structures and decision-making processes, with equitable opportunities to take on leadership roles in GBV prevention, mitigation and response in humanitarian emergencies. In other words: for WLOs meaningful participation is both a process and an outcome. The research question focuses on enabling factors and barriers for meaningful participation,

The **CAFI project** aims to translate the bold vision and ambitions of the CTA, by shifting power from decision-makers in the Global North, to women and girls, GBV service providers and responsible governments in the Global South. The second phase of implementation (2023–2025) is funded by GFFO, also contributing to the objectives set in Germany's Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) and Germany's leadership of the CTA in 2023–2024. This second phase is facilitated by CARE Deutschland e.V. in equitable partnership with eleven CAFI partners, who are WLOs from nine countries across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), West and Central Africa (WCA), Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and Ukraine (see map). These partners, in turn, support a broader network of 205 WLOs across these regions.

By scaling the existing capacity of WLOs to prioritise, design, staff, implement and coordinate GBV prevention, mitigation and response programming, they will be able to take individual action to address gaps and weaknesses in current humanitarian interventions.

CAFI Regional Network MENA
Led by Arab Women Association of Jordan (AWO)

CAFI Ukraine Network
37 WLOs
Led by Center Women's Perspectives

CAFI Lebanon Network
17 WLOs
Led by Himaya Daeem Aataa (HDA)

CAFI Iraq Network
[Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and Federal Iraq (FI)]
37 WLOs
Led by Baghdad Women Association (BWA) and Women Empowerment Organisation (WEO)

CAFI Regional Network WCA
Led by Dynamique des Femmes Juristes (DFJ), Democratic Republic of Congo

CAFI Colombia Network
25 WLOs
Led by Fundación para el desarrollo en Género y Familia (GENFAMI)

CAFI Venezuela Network
27 WLOs
Led by Tinta Violeta and UNIANDES

CAFI Niger Network
48 WLOs
Led by Comité des Jeunes Filles Leaders (COJEFIL)

CAFI Mali Network
18 WLOs
Led by FemiLead

placing particular attention on current funding mechanisms and the practices that may impede WLOs' involvement and decision-making in programming as well as in humanitarian coordination structures. Through a feminist, participatory, and inclusive approach to research, the report draws on a desk review and primary data collection from key stakeholders, in the form of key informant interviews (KIIs) with eleven WLOs (CAFI partners), three donors (including the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO) and the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs in the Government of France), as well as two INGO signatories of the CTA. The data collection also included a survey with the 205 WLOs that are part of the respective wider CAFI WLO networks in the regions, as well as three workshops with the eleven CAFI partner WLOs.

By centering the voices and perspectives of WLOs, this report aims to describe their current perspectives on meaningful participation and provide actionable recommendations to help reshape the humanitarian landscape, to better support the leadership of WLOs

in GBV prevention, risk mitigation, and response. The report is of particular relevance to stakeholders in the humanitarian system, including the donor community, United Nations (UN) agencies, INGOs, local and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and national and sub-national (host) governments engaged in humanitarian response efforts. Moreover, the advocacy messages presented in this report should also serve as valuable tools for WLOs that can be contextualised for use in their own national and international advocacy efforts. By equipping WLOs with evidence-based insights and actionable recommendations, this feminist and participatory report aims to strengthen their capacity to advocate for the resources, recognition, and decision-making roles they deserve, both at the local and national levels in their respective countries, and within the global humanitarian system. This can support WLOs to more effectively push for reforms in the humanitarian system's practices, empowering them to actively shape policies, strategies, and interventions that directly impact the communities that they serve. ■

UNEQUAL PARTNERSHIPS AND POWER DYNAMICS: A Call for Change

WLOs in humanitarian settings consistently face deep-rooted and structural power imbalances that hinder their ability to participate meaningfully in coordination and decision-making processes and structures. As highlighted by one WLO in the survey for this report, **"participation is influenced by power inequality"**, reflecting a broader systemic issue where international actors — INGOs, UN agencies, and donors — dominate the humanitarian agenda. The humanitarian system reflects and replicates the wider patriarchal power dynamics that reinforce hierarchies of control and exclude the voices, expertise and perspectives of women and girls, especially those experiencing intersecting discrimination. Women and girls are excluded from power and their access to resources is restricted on a systematic basis in patriarchal systems.
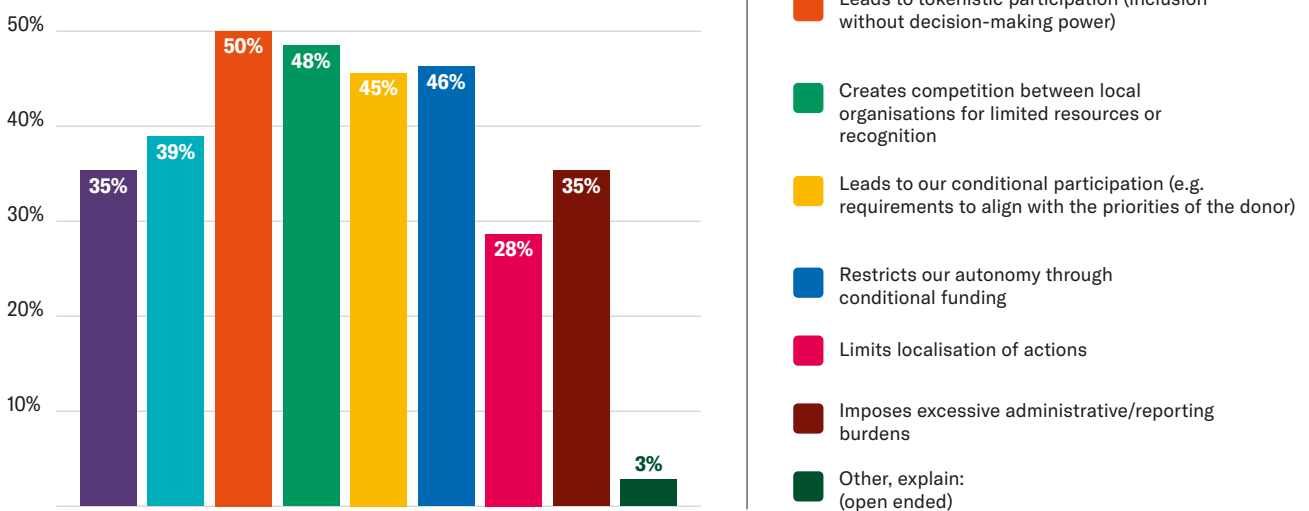
International actors often make key decisions about program interventions with inadequate consultation with WLOs, relegating them to the role of implementers rather than equal partners. A critical factor reinforcing these power imbalances is the control over funding by international actors, including INGOs. WLOs often depend on international donors, which can restrict their autonomy and flexibility to shape responses based on local needs. As one WLO interviewed reported, **"who gives the money plays the music"**, underscoring the structural inequality created when WLOs lack control over their resources.

WLOs also report that their inclusion in coordination spaces is often superficial. They may be invited to meetings, but their presence rarely translates into real decision-making power. One CAFI partner noted that larger organisations maintain decision-making authority, leaving smaller WLOs marginalised and frustrated by the tokenistic nature of their involvement.

Globally, **50 per cent of WLOs report that power dynamics between them and international humanitarian actors lead to their participation in coordination structures and decision-making processes to be tokenistic. In MENA and LAC, 41 per cent and 47 per cent of the WLOs (respectively) indicate that power dynamics leads to tokenism**. The findings from Ukraine and WCA, while not statistically representative, also suggest tokenism, with 56 per cent of WLOs in Ukraine and 61 per cent of WLOs in WCA suggesting this as well.

Survey question: **How do power dynamics between your organisation and other actors (e.g., donors, UN, national or local authorities, INGOs) affect your meaningful participation in GBV-related coordination structures and decision-making processes?**

Legend:
- Creates barriers to equal meaningful participation
- Limits our decision-making power
- Leads to tokenistic participation (inclusion without decision-making power)
- Creates competition between local organisations for limited resources or recognition
- Leads to our conditional participation (e.g. requirements to align with the priorities of the donor)
- Restricts our autonomy through conditional funding
- Limits localisation of actions
- Imposes excessive administrative/reporting burdens
- Other, explain: (open ended)

Bar chart values: 35%, 39%, 50%, 48%, 45%, 46%, 28%, 35%, 3%

Source: Survey with 205 CAFI WLOs, October 2024; own illustration.

Rebalancing Power Through More Equitable Partnerships

WLOs consistently emphasise the need for partnerships that reflect true equity, with decision-making shared from the program design phase onward. They advocate for a shift in power dynamics — one that includes equitable resource distribution, co-leadership, and long-term investments in autonomy, including through more long-term flexible core funding. True agency emerges only when WLOs have the power to define their priorities and shape humanitarian responses in emergency contexts.

CAFI partners explained how international partners often come with predetermined solutions that do not align with local needs: **"Partners bring us projects that are 'prêt-à-porter'. It is a take-it-or-leave-it situation for us, there is little to no room to push back."** This systematic exclusion from early decision-making reinforces power imbalances and limits WLOs' ability to influence the humanitarian response. One of the respondents added **"the more an organisation is involved in decision-making and has access to information and resources, the more powerful it is."** WLOs demand to participate in decisions from the outset, to ensure interventions are contextually relevant and effective, and can therefore truly respond to the needs of women and girls.

Structural Exclusion and Fragmentation of Efforts

Despite initiatives such as the Grand Bargain, aimed at increasing the leadership of local organisations, the reality remains that donors often favour working with larger local organisations. One of the CAFI partners notes that the impact of localisation efforts remains limited, with many local organisations and especially WLOs still being excluded from the decision-making processes that directly affect their work.

INGOs are also often regarded in the role of donor in relation to WLOs, because they are the main contract holder with the donor, and WLOs are treated as subcontractors to the INGO. In many instances, INGOs pass along strict donor requirements and add their own reporting requirements onto WLOs. Interview respondents, WLO and INGOs alike, repeatedly emphasised that INGOs could leverage their relative power and resources to act as a buffer, to support and protect WLOs. One INGO respondent acknowledges

this tension, noting that, while INGOs advocate for localisation, fears about losing control over resources often prevent them from fully empowering local organisations.

Access to decision-making spaces is often determined by visibility, relationships, and access to critical information—factors not available to most WLOs. Many WLOs referred to systemic language injustices that further limit their ability to engage in key discussions and negotiations. In the survey, 34 per cent of respondents (globally) referenced language injustice as a significant barrier to their role as partners in this work, with the highest proportion being in LAC (42 per cent of WLOs), and the lowest being in WCA (18 per cent of WLOs). The language barriers take the form of lack of translation and interpretation into local languages, and the increasing use of English as a lingua franca in many contexts, including more generally in the humanitarian system.

A simple solution would be to ensure appropriate and timely translation and interpretation into most relevant national and local languages.

> **"**
>
> **Many organisations have staff who do not even speak French, [much less the local language]. So, to communicate with communities in the field, they need interpreters. And a lot of this work is done by WLOs, local organisations on the ground, but they don't often feature in the reports that give visibility to all the work that has been done."**
>
> Representative of a WLO, CAFI partner

> **"**
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> **Both at the national level and at global level, WLOs are not really able to participate fully because humanitarian coordination meetings or global events are being held in English, because that's the language that the international community is using for these coordination spaces. And it really inhibits the ability of WLOs to have visibility and to actively participate in a meaningful way."**
>
> Representative of a donor

Survey question: **What challenges prevent your organisation from being recognized as an equal partner?**

Region	Percentage
MENA	33%
Ukraine	40%
WCA	18%
LAC	42%
Total %	34%
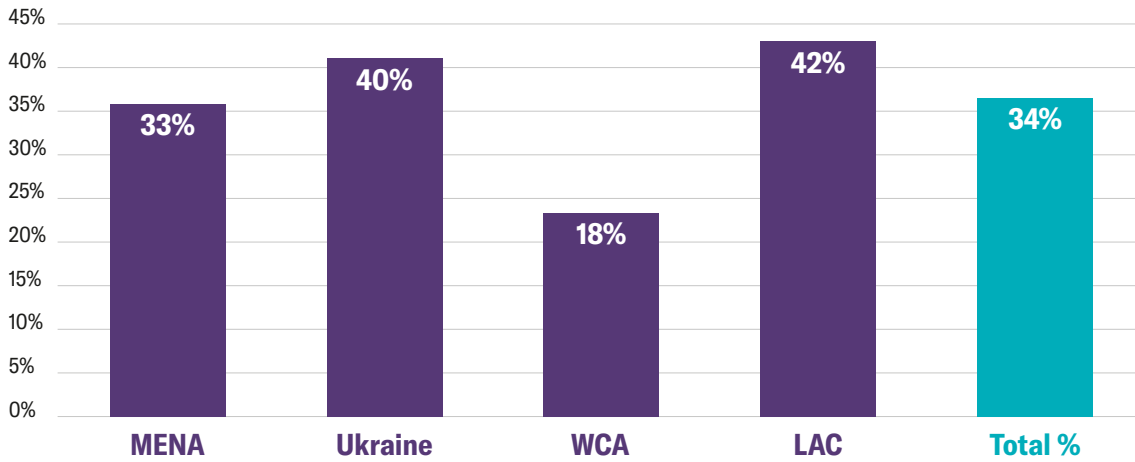
Percentage of respondents who identified language barriers as a challenge

Source: Survey with 205 CAFI WLOs, October 2024; own illustration.

Building Collective Power: Advocacy through Networks and Coalitions

WLOs recognise the power of collective action to amplify their voices and influence policy. Networks and coalitions play a crucial role in helping WLOs share resources, expertise, and strategies and advocate for more inclusive policies. 💡 Several respondents pointed to the CAFI project itself, highlighting how the CAFI network – in the countries and internationally – has allowed WLOs to strengthen their role in emergencies and integrate gender perspectives across sectors. 💡

💡 One of the WLOs underscored the value of ongoing engagement with networks, explaining that even when participation is not directly related to their specific project work, it helps raise the visibility of the WLOs and networks, which in turn attracts funding opportunities. 💡

However, competition within the sector, between larger and smaller WLOs, can also complicate power dynamics, especially when there are very few spaces for WLOs at the table. Larger WLOs at the national level may replicate the same hierarchical practices that smaller WLOs experience with INGOs, thereby further concentrating power at the top, and marginalising the voices of grassroots WLOs.

> ❝
> In Niger, the first phase of CAFI enabled the creation of a coalition of women, girls, and families against GBV. It is a coalition of several organisations run by women and girls in six regions of Niger. All these organisations work on GBV in one way or another, whether in humanitarian situations, or especially in situations of violence against women. And in our interventions, in fact, we include the various regions [in Niger] every time there is an activity. When we have activities outside Niamey [the Capital city], it's our representatives in those regions whom we call, to get in touch with the authorities in advance, if there's a mission that involves travel to a region. They do a bit of facilitation between the authorities and the coalition, to keep each other informed about what's happening in such and such an area, especially in high security zones."
>
> Representative of a WLO, CAFI partner

> ❝
> When there are only one or two WLOs invited into these coordination spaces, it is still a very precarious position that makes you feel insecure. That's why the organisations that represent us up to now, are not yet fulfilling the representation in the way we wanted. They are already telling us that it's really a very intimidating environment in which to express a point of view. So, if there were more of us there, on the basis of a compulsory quota for example, we might feel less beholden in terms of the latitude we have to take and all the rest."
>
> Representative of a WLO, CAFI partner

Some CAFI partners also shared that they are sometimes expected to play an informal coordination role as only limited space is made available at humanitarian coordination structures. In these cases, WLOs are expected to bring a representative view of all WLOs, which is unrealistic, and also erodes the potential for WLOs from different communities to bring nuance and perspective. ⚡ The establishment of WLO networks should be driven by WLOs themselves, and sustainably resourced. ⚡

Shifting Power: Reversing Hierarchies

WLOs advocate for a reversal of traditional power dynamics, where international actors play a supporting role and local organisations lead. This shift is critical for empowering WLOs and enabling them to take charge of humanitarian responses, in ways that reflect the realities of the communities they serve. ⚡ Many CAFI partners suggested that partnerships must be led by local organisations rather than dictated by international actors. ⚡

⚡ Some international actors, such as the Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility (GBV AoR) are piloting co-leadership models in Somalia and South Sudan, with support from a donor government, whereby both local and international actors share responsibility for leading humanitarian coordination structures. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is also championing efforts to advance WLO leadership by mapping WLOs and women refugee-led organisations (WRLOs) at the field level, in pilot countries. They also aim to address barriers, especially those related to languages of coordination meetings, and the resources needed, to ensure participation, while encouraging capacity sharing between organisations, with a view to supporting WLOs to transition to co-leadership roles. ⚡ While these efforts are seen as a positive step toward rebalancing power by many WLOs, they require further investment and scaling up to have a lasting impact.

Reversing these hierarchies is not just about shifting power in partnerships — it is about recognising and valuing the expertise, knowledge, and leadership that WLOs bring to humanitarian action. By placing WLOs at the centre of decision-making, more inclusive, effective, and sustainable humanitarian responses can be created. It is about **"the sustainability of the WLOs as development actors in their own right, in the country."** (Representative of a WLO, CAFI partner). ■

> "
> But in the end it's a power relationship, that is, it might be a cooperation agency here, that suddenly doesn't let us into the spaces, but it turns out that we talk to the person from the agency who is in New York, and then we tell them something, that person calls and then we have the space. It is an exercise of mediation of hierarchical power relations, because both the government and the agencies are hierarchical, and they are absolutely vertical internally. And I also believe that to arrive at a logic of horizontality is very difficult because within the organisation itself, it is very vertical and very hierarchical."
>
> Representative of a WLO, CAFI partner

📣 Recommendations

For WLOs:	• Build diverse advocacy networks to amplify demands for equitable decision-making and autonomous access to funding.
	• Strengthen organisational capacity (e.g., financial management, strategic planning, and advocacy) to increase participation and influence in humanitarian systems.
For INGOs:	• Treat WLOs as equal partners by co-creating programs, championing and scaling up models where WLOs lead on the design and implementation of humanitarian responses.
	• Develop partnership frameworks with clear principles, accountability, and feedback loops from WLOs to INGO staff, to promote inclusive practices.
	• Hold INGO staff to account in implementing partnership frameworks, including through WLOs giving feedback on the partnership with the organisation.
For UN Agencies:	• Implement quotas for the participation of WLOs in humanitarian coordination platforms and decentralise decision-making, creating more inclusive coordination platforms that prioritise diverse voices, especially those of grassroots WLOs, and dismantle the hierarchical structures that often marginalise them.
	• Establish mechanisms to track and evaluate WLOs' influence in decision-making outcomes.
	• Ensure translation and interpretation of key processes into relevant national and local languages, including at the design stages of GBV interventions.
For Donors:	• Provide flexible, multi-year funding and streamline application processes, to reduce administrative burdens on WLOs.
	• Fund WLO networks and capacity-sharing initiatives to support WLO leadership.

MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION:
Present but Excluded

What Meaningful Participation Means to WLOs and Donors

Meaningful participation for WLOs in local, national and international humanitarian coordination structures emerges as a multi-faceted concept. It encompasses being present in coordination structures, while also moving beyond mere attendance, to having a voice by which to influence actual decisions regarding the direction and priorities of a humanitarian response, including opportunities to lead or co-lead coordination structures (working groups or clusters).

> "
> Meaningful participation is not simply to attend these spaces. It is important to be able to attend, to be present, but meaningful participation should be more focused on ensuring that we are included in the planning moments, in the working groups, in the coordination or meeting spaces, that we can be part of the design of workplans and annual action plans. Participating should also mean having the possibility to have a voice and also to set objectives [for a humanitarian response]."
>
> Representative of a WLO, CAFI partner

WLOs underscore that meaningful participation includes the humanitarian system becoming more transparent and accountable, ensuring that all stakeholders understand how decisions are made and can contribute meaningfully to adapting the way decisions are taken in the humanitarian system.

WLOs emphasise the importance of being recognised as knowledge bearers of their communities' needs, vulnerabilities, and strengths. **They call for respect and value for their diversity, as well as empowerment to amplify the voices of excluded groups such as indigenous or Afro-descendant communities, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and women and girls from conflict-affected settings**. Several CAFI partners criticised international actors for approaching humanitarian responses with preconceived ideas and standardised methods, transplanting practices from one region to another, without adequately adapting to the unique needs and context of the local environment.

> "
> For me, meaningful participation is when WLOs can voice their opinions and influence decisions in the GBV response, as we are the first responders in any crisis. Our participation on the ground is already meaningful, but we need our participation in the GBV sub-working group to benefit others in the working groups, and to also attract funding. WLOs know the needs of women since we are in touch with women survivors on a daily basis, and we have expertise and know-how."
>
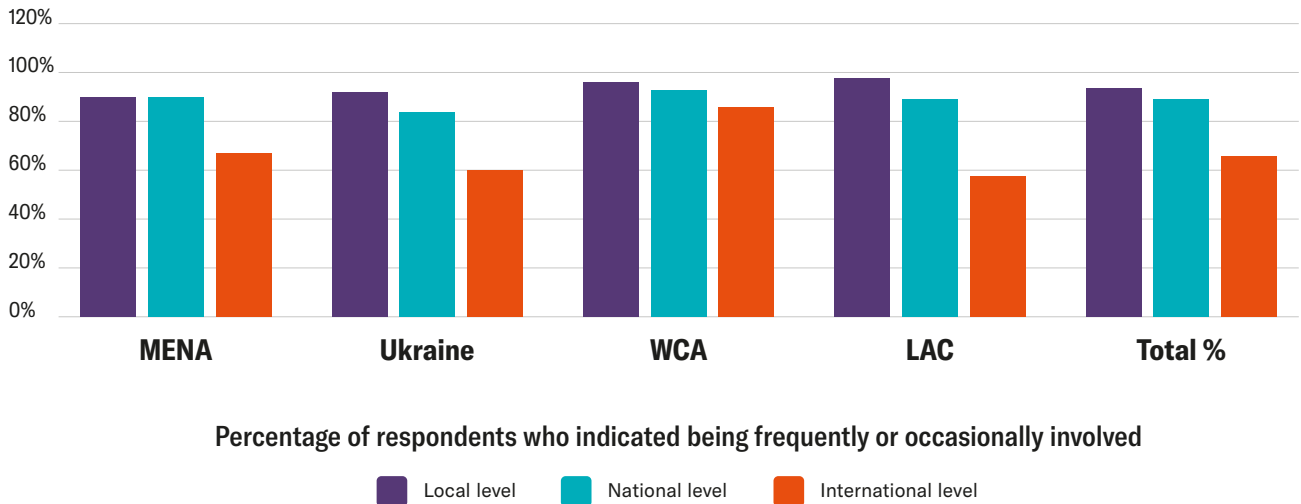> Representative of a WLO, CAFI partner

Donors recognise that including WLOs as part of coordination structures is key, and that much more needs to be done in terms of enhancing WLOs' meaningful participation in humanitarian coordination structures and decision-making processes. They also emphasise the importance of WLOs' engagement at all levels of coordination structures, including in Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs), and at all times, including early on in humanitarian responses. One donor stated that "a lot of times at the onset of a crisis [WLOs are not part of these structures] and then at one point, WLOs are taken into account and are made part of the emergency response, but that is sometimes already too late. So, the involvement of WLOs from the onset of a crisis is very important." Interviews with CAFI partners also confirm the importance of providing opportunities to WLOs at the onset of a crisis - a practice that remains far from the current reality. For instance, in Ukraine, space was opened up for local organisations to co-lead coordination structures only in the second year of the response. In Niger, a coalition of WLOs working on GBV was only able to join the humanitarian coordination structures in 2023, a full two decades after the response was first established.

> "
> Meaningful participation, for us, is for WLOs to be seated around the coordination table in the same way as other actors. So, it means participating in the discussion and in the decision-making, in the same way as others. From our point of view, in these structures, the link is not necessarily made between inviting WLOs and giving them the same weight in decision-making, as other actors."
>
> Representative of a donor

Survey question: **How involved is your organisation in local, national and international coordination structures and other decision-making processes related to GBV in humanitarian settings?**

Percentage of respondents who indicated being frequently or occasionally involved

■ Local level   ■ National level   ■ International level

Source: Survey with 205 CAFI WLOs, October 2024; own illustration.
Note: A comparatively high margin of error for the Ukraine and WCA data suggests that the results for these groups should be interpreted with caution.

Beyond the Numbers: Exploring the Influence of WLOs in Coordination Structures

Most WLOs in the CAFI network report being either frequently or occasionally attending local, national, or international coordination structures and other decision-making processes related to GBV interventions in humanitarian settings. Although survey results indicate that, globally, 94 per cent of WLOs in the CAFI network are involved in local structures and processes, 89 per cent are involved at the national level, and 66 per cent at the international level, a look beyond these numbers is needed, in order to explore the significance of this **involvement and the real influence** of the WLOs in these structures.

It is important to note, that this statistic only portrays WLOs that are connected to the CAFI project. Some CAFI partners reported that the involvement of WLOs had improved following support by the CAFI project, which reportedly invested significant efforts into sharing information about coordination structures. Globally, UNHCR data indicates that in refugee settings only four WLOs/WRLOs were leading or co-leading humanitarian coordination structures on GBV in 2023 (Page, 2024).

In the interviews, CAFI partners report that the level and quality of participation varies by context – i.e. country to country, and sometimes within the same country, such as in DRC, where international and local organisations and WLOs are reported to be very active in conflict-affected eastern DRC, but less so in other parts of DRC. CAFI partners in all countries also indicated that bigger, longer established and well-connected WLOs are more involved than smaller WLOs, or WLOs based in remote areas.

Quality of Participation in Coordination Structures

Many WLOs describe their participation in coordination spaces as **"limited"** and **"symbolic"**, and that their inclusion in coordination spaces feels like it is a mere **"obligation"** for other international actors, with their presence being used to **"tick the box"** rather than to genuinely influence decision-making. WLOs maintain that their lack of inclusion and meaningful participation is also due to **systemic sexism in the humanitarian system**. One INGO respondent measures the quality of participation as rather a feeling of being included, and of being in a safe space. Some WLOs assert that when they attend meetings, their ideas are often dismissed, and that the more established WLOs in their contexts act similarly to INGOs, i.e. by dominating coordination processes. They note that, while they are invited to meetings, they are rarely consulted or involved when important decisions are made, as they are only seen as implementing partners or contractors. WLOs point out that these realities are context-specific and may vary from one country to another.

> " I think you have to ask local organisations, local WLOs, what meaningful participation looks like, but certainly, it's about feelings. It's about having a safe space. It's about having a voice. It's about feeling heard. And it's about their voice and their autonomy in decision-making, and it's about input actually being received and accomplished as opposed to just being an echo chamber, which is what we hear."
>
> Representative of an INGO

> " It seems more of an obligation, based on long-standing actions and lobbying, to have WLOs in the humanitarian architecture system, if only as a formality. So, we really feel that it's like an obligation [for the international actors], but it's not yet an environment that is prepared and ready to receive and work and with WLOs. We see this challenge in particular, where we're in an environment where we feel that they have no choice but to deal with us, but they are not ready to have us on an equal footing with them. And here I'm talking about the agencies of the United Nations system."
>
> Representative of a WLO, CAFI partner

One CAFI partner also believes that given they are a national organisation participating in national-level structures, their voice is more heard in these platforms than the voices of WLOs without a national presence. They suggest that generally WLOs have more influence in local-level structures than at the national level.

The **challenges of meaningful participation extend beyond tokenism to include practical and structural barriers**. WLOs repeatedly mention language barriers which exclude non-English and non-French speaking WLOs. Time and logistical constraints also emerge as major challenges, particularly for smaller WLOs juggling multiple responsibilities, making them struggle to attend meetings scheduled on short notice. All respondents referred to logistical challenges, including delays in receiving crucial documents or meeting invitations, further hindering WLOs' ability to engage in meaningful decision-making. These technical, digital, travel, and language barriers further limit the participation of WLOs, especially those not working in a dominant language or based in the capital, or regional hubs.

Several CAFI partners report that WLOs provide a lot of information and data to coordination structures to inform their humanitarian assessments, planning and implementation efforts, but that the relationship remains extractive.

> " Meaningful participation means that WLOs' opinions are taken into account and influence action plans, but those leading the humanitarian response in my country are being tokenistic in how they're doing it. Meaningful participation also means working in partnership, we're not here just to give humanitarian actors data [about activities or needs]."
>
> Representative of a WLO, CAFI partner

From the perspective of donors and INGOs, WLOs' participation in humanitarian structures is still far from being meaningful. One donor mentioned "the role of WLOs in coordination structures is important, but it is still weak from the point of view of full, effective participation in the various processes under way." **The donors who were interviewed for this report elaborated on practical challenges compromising their ability to support WLOs' meaningful participation, which are different from the structural and systemic barriers that WLOs reported to be facing**. Examples of such practical challenges mentioned by donors include their lack of strong experience in gender equality and a historical tendency to partner with organisations in sectors other than GBV [such as the health, education, and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Promotion (WaSH) sectors], lack of knowledge of the WLOs operating on the ground in a given emergency context, as well as language barriers donors face when they participate in English-speaking coordination structures, which hamper their own ability to fully engage with coordination structures.
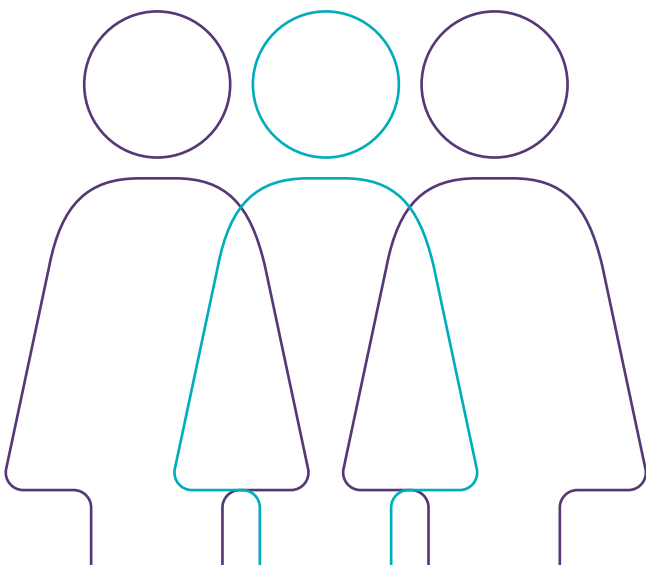
Paving the Way: WLOs Slowly Gaining Ground in Humanitarian Leadership and Coordination

Despite these challenges, several CAFI partners as well as donors and others reported some progress, in terms of more WLOs joining humanitarian coordination structures and decision-making spaces, although the pace of this change has been slow. A few CAFI partners reported emerging stories of success, due to strong and relentless advocacy efforts, such as:

📍 GENFAMI in **Colombia** was selected by the members of the National Coordination Space for Gender-Based Violence Prevention and Response as the third co-coordinator of the subgroup, and the first to be a Civil Society Organisation. They consider this to be a recognition of the organisation's work and its contributions to addressing GBV in the country, highlighting the importance of including WLOs in coordination spaces and the openness of the United Nations System in addressing humanitarian issues in the country.

📍 The Center Women's Perspectives in **Ukraine** was elected to co-chair a local GBV sub-cluster. A representative of UNFPA, which is the co-lead of the national GBV sub-cluster, was invited to a strategic CAFI Ukraine meeting to present the work of the sub-cluster to WLOs and inform them on how to get involved. Since then, ten more WLOs have joined local GBV Working Groups or other clusters. Six WLOs were already members.

📍 HDA in **Lebanon** is co-leading the CTA NGO Working Group.

📍 AWO in **Jordan** previously co-lead the CTA NGO working group.

📍 Tinta Violeta and UNIANDES in **Venezuela** argue that some of the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) decisions (in Venezuela) have been driven by national and local organisations. They attribute this progress to some WLOs approaching coordination structures with a proactive attitude and demonstrating that national and local organisations have an in-depth knowledge of their country's situation and context. They also attribute it to the relatively recent establishment of the humanitarian system in Venezuela, which coincided with a growing commitment of the global humanitarian community to localisation, gender mainstreaming, and the centrality of protection, among others. These reasons would explain the opening of the humanitarian system in Venezuela to the substantive participation of national and local NGOs.

📍 COJEFIL in **Niger** reported about WLOs persisting in their strive to be included in the GBV sub-cluster. After years of unsuccessful attempts to advocate with the sub-cluster lead for a coalition of WLOs working on GBV to be included in the sub-cluster, WLOs that were already members of the sub-cluster took it upon themselves to inform coalition members of meeting dates and times, which progressively made them become part of the sub-cluster.

CAFI partners acknowledge that **these improvements are long processes, and fundamentally about the transformation of structures of humanitarian action**, which takes time.

Several respondents also stated that initiatives such as the CAFI project can have an instrumental contribution in amplifying WLOs' meaningful participation. Especially emphasised was the benefit of supporting CAFI partners and WLOs' presence or leadership in coordination structures and participation in international events, especially at the global level - events which proved to be valuable platforms for networking, coalescing, and getting their voices heard. ■

📢 Recommendations

For WLOs:
- Advocate collectively for inclusion in coordination mechanisms, such as HCTs, with quotas for representation.
- Utilise platforms such as social media, websites and other digital tools to increase visibility and communicate needs, successes, and contributions.
- Inform international humanitarian actors about practical barriers they face in their inclusion, which can be mitigated through the provision of language interpretation during meetings, facilitating access to online meetings, and funding transportation to in-person meetings.
- Enhance the monitoring and evaluation of the outcomes and impact of humanitarian interventions.

For INGOs:
- Cede space for WLOs and advocate for quotas for WLOs in coordination structures.
- Ensure and provide funding for measures that make participation accessible, such as covering travel expenses, facilitating access to online meetings, and providing interpretation services.
- Foster WLO networks and co-leadership roles to promote shared decision-making and local leadership.

For UN Agencies:
- Reserve seats for WLOs in coordination structures and ensure their meaningful participation across other humanitarian structures (such as WaSH and protection).
- Provide transparent, accessible information on participation processes, while linking GBV efforts to broader humanitarian sectors.
- Open up opportunities for WLOs to be in co-leadership roles in coordination structures, and provide support for them in these leadership roles, where needed.
- Ensure the inclusion of WLOs in all humanitarian clusters, linking women's rights and GBV efforts with sectors such as WaSH, cash, livelihoods, for more intersectional humanitarian responses.

For Donors:
- Demand that HCTs and national and local humanitarian coordination structures include WLO representation, as an entry point toward more meaningful participation.
- Fund WLOs' participation in coordination mechanisms, addressing barriers such as travel, language, and technology.
- Support capacity-building programs for WLOs to strengthen their influence in humanitarian leadership.
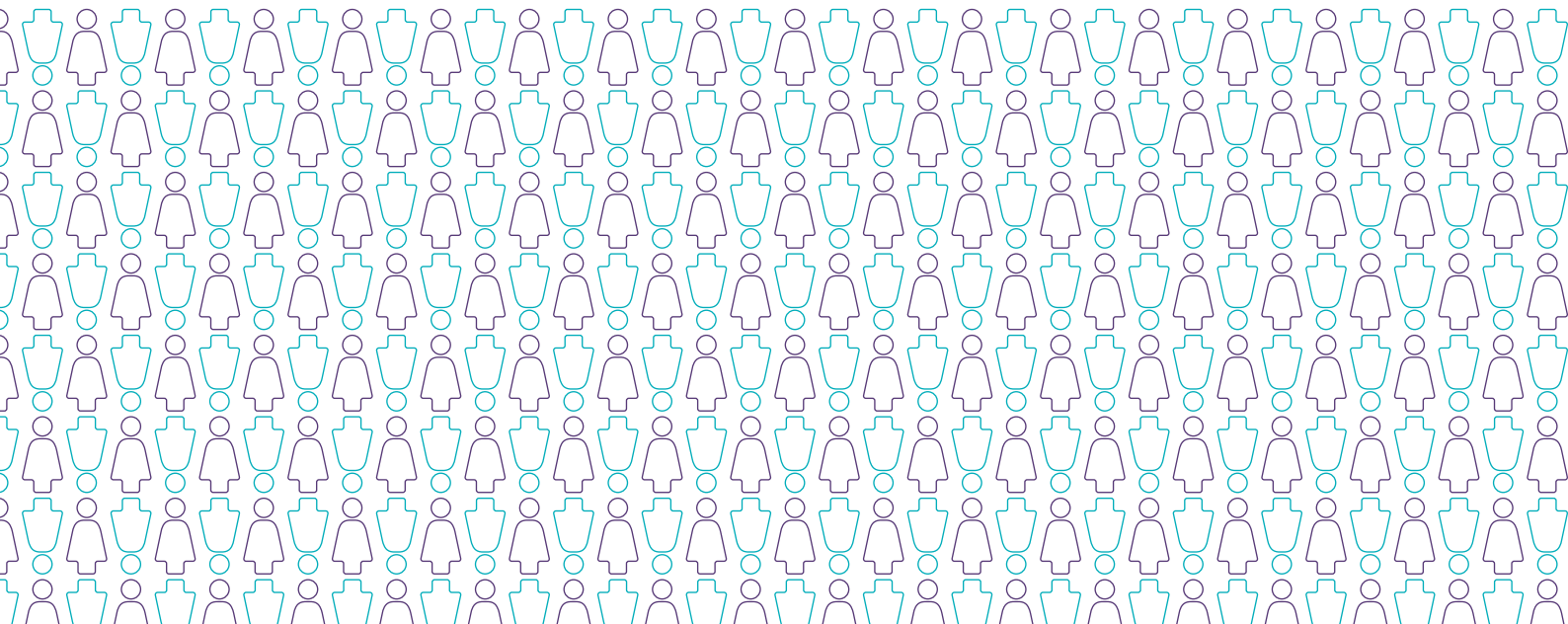
UNLOCKING POTENTIAL: Access to Adequate and Appropriate Funding

WLOs face critical barriers in accessing resources and funding, limiting their impact and decision-making on GBV in humanitarian settings. Despite being front-line responders, WLOs struggle with short-term, inflexible project-based funding that fails to support core operations, long-term strategies, or staff retention. **Complex compliance requirements, and an overemphasis on reporting, further disadvantage WLOs**, reinforcing power imbalances and limiting meaningful participation in coordination and agenda setting.

> "When projects are short term, we cannot guarantee sustainability. A project's duration has a direct impact on its sustainability and effectiveness. Quality funding must also be flexible; in other words, it can adapt to the demands and changes of our countries in crisis."
>
> Representative of a WLO, CAFI partner

Demand for Sustainable, Multi-Year, and Core Funding

In the survey, 82 per cent of WLOs identified **insufficient funding as a primary barrier to being equal partners in GBV responses**. Funding structures often prioritise short-term projects with strict compliance frameworks, limiting WLOs' ability to cover core operational costs, or respond flexibly to evolving crises. As one WLO noted, "[we need] institutional funding for salaries, so that there is someone to learn and work with, so that we are not forced to work from project to project."

Nearly 80 per cent of survey respondents emphasised the need for **fast access to emergency or rapid response funds**, while 76 per cent advocated for dedicated funding streams exclusively for WLOs. Additionally, 65 per cent highlighted the importance of program-specific funding, and 62 per cent called for core or operational funding to support sustainability. 💡 Multi-year, flexible funding is essential for both immediate GBV responses and long-term strategic engagement within the humanitarian system.💡

Survey question: **What challenges prevent your organisation from being recognized as an equal partner?**
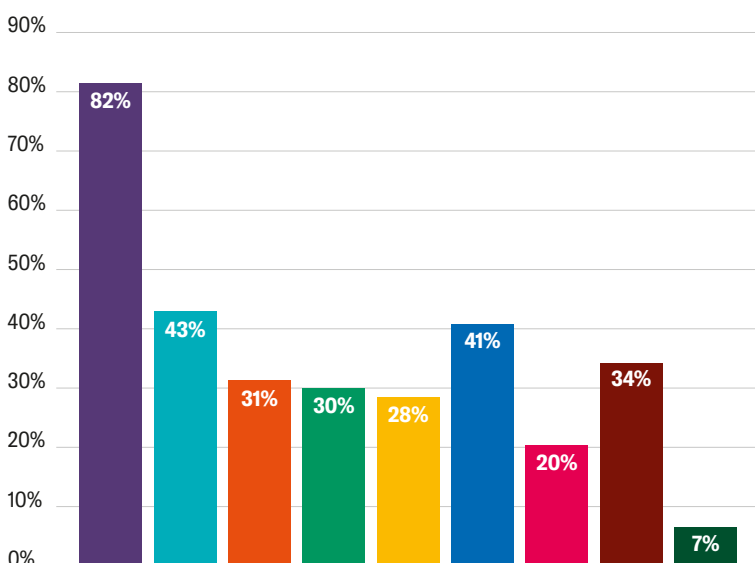
Legend:
- Insufficient financial means
- Limited personnel to participate in coordination structures and exchanges
- Limited information on GBV mechanisms and/or how to engage in them
- Restrictions set on WLO participation (such as quotas for local organisations in GBV coordination structures)
- Lack of visibility and advocacy opportunities
- Donor-driven agendas
- Lack of advocacy capacities and expertise
- Language barriers
- Other, explain: (open ended)

Bar values: 82%, 43%, 31%, 30%, 28%, 41%, 20%, 34%, 7%

Source: Survey with 205 CAFI WLOs, October 2024; own illustration.

Survey question: **What can donors, UN agencies, and INGOs do to improve their funding mechanisms and practices to support your meaningful participation in GBVrelated coordination structures and decision-making processes?**

Chart values:
- 76%
- 79%
- 53%
- 65%
- 62%
- 58%
- 66%
- 58%
- 10%
- 2%

Legend:
- Consider dedicated funding streams only open to WLOs
- Facilitate fast access to emergency or rapid response funds
- Support collaborative funding models (e.g. pooled funding)
- Offer dedicated programme funding
- Offer core/operational funding
- Provide funding for staff to participate in humanitarian coordination structures
- Map available GBV funding
- Ease their compliance and reporting requirements (make them less demanding)
- Funding does not play a role in WLOs' more meaningful participation
- Other, explain: (open ended)

Source: Survey with 205 CAFI WLOs, October 2024; own illustration.

> "If funding is sustainable, we'll be able to continue providing high-quality services such as mental health, psychosocial support, case management, and cash assistance as well, so that women and girls can overcome shocks."
>
> Representative of a WLO, CAFI partner

The need for sustainable funding also highlights a critical issue, which is that WLOs often spend excessive time and resources seeking funding, rather than engaging in strategic planning or building long-term donor relationships. This highlights a key issue - WLOs are often so focused on securing funding that they lack the time and resources for strategic planning or building long-term donor relationships.

> "Because of our need for immediate funding, we tend to spend all our time on seeking funding, instead of thinking and working strategically on our funding situation."
>
> Representative of a WLO, CAFI partner

💡 For WLOs, 'quality funding' encompasses more than just the provision of funds. It involves the ability to cover both programmatic and operational expenses, build organisational resilience, and sustain impact over the long term. Quality funding is characterized by flexibility, multi-year commitments, and core funding to cover salaries, utilities, and capacity-building costs. As one WLO CAFI partner explained "meaningful funding means that it is flexible and long-term support that can be used for both programmatic activities and for organisational development." For funding to be genuinely impactful, it must also be gender-sensitive, inclusive, and tailored to the specific needs of WLOs in crisis contexts.💡

Addressing Barriers to Transparent and Equitable Partnerships

Another significant challenge for WLOs is the complexity of compliance requirements attached to funding. Many donors impose extensive due diligence processes that require substantial administrative capacity — resources that many community-based, small-scale, often volunteer-based and grassroots WLOs lack. Furthermore, WLOs reported experiencing funding cuts or reallocations when facing political or governmental backlash, particularly due to their advocacy on women's rights and GBV.

> "
> The compliance requirements of some donors are very demanding, which require that WLOs allocate dedicated teams to work on compliance. Compliance requires a lot of effort, and many WLOs, with only ten or 15 staff, find it challenging to meet these demands."
>
> Representative of a WLO, CAFI partner

> "
> This capacity strengthening support depends on who defined what capacity is needed. And that's why many local organisations are tired of capacity strengthening. We're rained upon by training sessions, but in the end, the real question is: What's in it for us?"
>
> Representative of a WLO, CAFI partner

Another recurring issue is the lack of tracking and transparency regarding funding for WLOs working on GBV. While initiatives such as the Grand Bargain aim to increase local funding allocations, tracking mechanisms remain inadequate. **Donors acknowledge this gap and highlight the need for tagging systems within their information management (IM) systems to track funding flows to WLOs**. Without reliable tracking, progress toward targets such as the Grand Bargain's commitment for 25 per cent of humanitarian funding to be allocated to local organisations (Grand Bargain, 2016), and the CTA donor commitment to increase funding for GBV in emergencies and direct funding to WLOs (CTA, n.d.), will not be possible.

💡 WLOs stress the need for equitable and transparent partnerships with international actors, including donors. 💡 This includes not only equitable access to funding, but also the fair distribution of resources, such as overhead costs. One CAFI partner stated, **"equitable partnerships require transparency and shared overheads, with WLOs participating in strategic decisions."**

💡 Transparent resource allocation and meaningful involvement in decision-making processes are essential for fostering equal partnerships. 💡 While donors and INGOs increasingly support co-governance models, there is uncertainty about institutionalising WLO participation, without relying on short-term project-based funding. Progress in contexts such as South Sudan and Somalia, where WLOs have taken co-leadership roles, remains vulnerable to shifts in donor funding and/or to their political priorities.

Rethinking Capacity Strengthening

Capacity strengthening remains a contentious issue. Many CAFI partners highlight that capacity-strengthening programs often fail to center WLOs' voices and experiences, leading to fatigue and limited meaningful impact.

One WLO pointed out that capacity strengthening can be empowering for WLOs, when it is about giving them the opportunity to exchange knowledge and skills, to make a lasting impact. According to the survey, the top three concrete capacity strengthening actions that can support WLOs' meaningful participation are: **access to information, that includes regular updates and tools about GBV prevention, mitigation, and response; training or information sessions on donor expectations, procedures, and compliance requirements; and opportunities for WLOs to exchange experiences and knowledge with each other**. As one CAFI partner noted, these efforts "strengthen our ability to navigate the humanitarian system, understand trends, and stay up to date on critical issues like GBV and security." Capacity strengthening is also needed for the international community to better understand the realities of GBV, and how to partner as equals with WLOs.
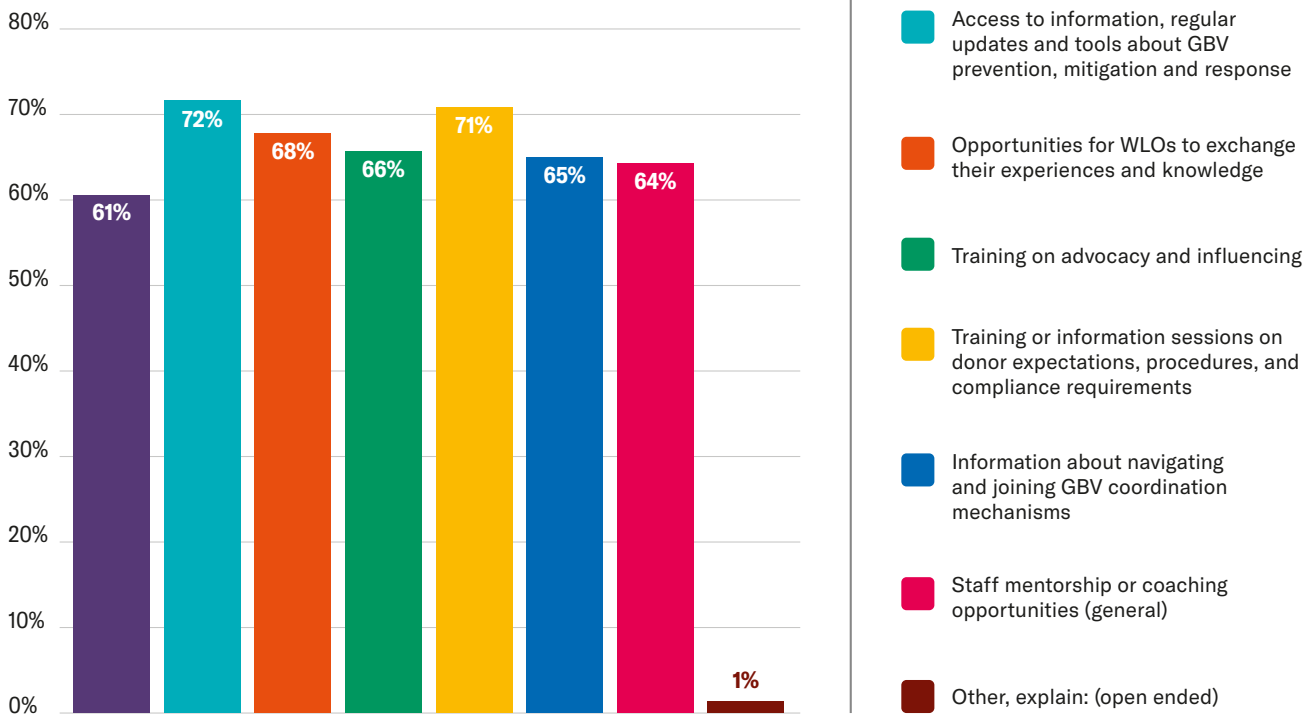
Understanding and Sharing Risk

> "
> We can only access small funding, and we need longer-term support. We haven't been able to make much progress on localisation and donors are telling us that this is because WLOs don't have enough organisational capacity, although sometimes this concern is also overblown, but I think we can also bridge this gap, by lowering donor standards and improving WLO capacity."
>
> Representative of a WLO, CAFI partner

While compliance requirements aim to manage risk, they often create hurdles that prevent WLOs from securing the necessary funding and support. The complexity and inflexibility of these requirements limit WLOs' ability to access the resources they need to build long-term strategies, hire staff, and invest in their core operations, ultimately hindering their effectiveness in addressing GBV and humanitarian needs.

Survey question: **What kinds of capacity strengthening will support your organisation's meaningful participation as a GBV actor?**

Color	Category
■ (purple)	Training in technical topics related to GBV (e.g. GBV minimum standards)
■ (teal)	Access to information, regular updates and tools about GBV prevention, mitigation and response
■ (orange)	Opportunities for WLOs to exchange their experiences and knowledge
■ (green)	Training on advocacy and influencing
■ (yellow)	Training or information sessions on donor expectations, procedures, and compliance requirements
■ (blue)	Information about navigating and joining GBV coordination mechanisms
■ (pink)	Staff mentorship or coaching opportunities (general)
■ (dark red)	Other, explain: (open ended)

Bar chart values:
- 61%
- 72%
- 68%
- 66%
- 71%
- 65%
- 64%
- 1%

Source: Survey with 205 CAFI WLOs, October 2024; own illustration.

> "When we program a lot of funding over a short period of time, we are very careful about the risk that might come out of it – they [WLOs] are very much driven by the passion and the needs that they are seeing on the ground, but then we're always very careful that we might see some bad consequences in terms of risks WLOs are not necessarily equipped to handle."
>
> Representative of a donor

Regarding the alleged lack of organisational capacity in WLOs being cited by donors as a major concern, some have even suggested that this is the reason for slow progress on localisation.

However, risks (such as organisational, programmatic, fiduciary, reputational, and others) are a reality to all humanitarian organisations working in emergencies, yet they are disproportionately emphasised when considering partnering with WLOs, often reflecting underlying biases in donor trust. This selective scrutiny may stem from systemic factors, including gender and racial prejudices, which influence which organisations donors deem trustworthy or capable of managing risk, further hindering progress on localisation.

While donors and INGOs acknowledge the power imbalances that hinder WLOs' participation, they often **focus on compliance, accountability, and risk management as the primary obstacles to localisation**. This view overlooks the structural barriers WLOs face, including the restrictive funding models and hierarchical decision-making systems which dominate their reality.

According to WLOs, the real risk - which is rarely acknowledged - is the failure to support grassroots organisations that are on the frontlines of addressing systemic injustice. As humanitarian crises become more acute and more protracted, and given the globally rising gender backlash, WLOs continue to face well-funded opposition from anti-gender and authoritarian state actors. **The cost of not funding WLOs is a loss of critical, locally-driven responses to GBV, which undermines the very purpose of humanitarian action: To ensure the meaningful protection of affected populations, including women and girls, and prioritise their needs**. Existing risk frameworks overlook the harm caused by structural inequalities, which create gaps in preventing, addressing, and responding to GBV. To make progress, there needs to be a shift in how risk is understood. International actors, including donors, should share the responsibility with WLOs, providing more support, rather than imposing strict compliance rules. WLOs believe that 'risk' should not be seen just as something to avoid or pass on through rigid processes, but as a shared challenge to tackle in countering the systemic injustice that is GBV. ■

📢 Recommendations

For WLOs:
- Continue to build alliances with national and international actors to share crucial information, enhance visibility, and stir donor engagement.
- Leverage proactive strategies to advocate for funding transparency using frameworks such as the Grand Bargain and the CTA, to hold donors accountable.

For INGOs:
- Partner with WLOs to build equitable sub-granting mechanisms, ensuring a fair share of overhead costs and support WLOs with capacity-strengthening on compliance and strategic funding.
- Collaborate with donors to simplify funding processes and advocate for sustained, flexible funding.
- Adopt sectoral and organisational approaches that foster equal partnerships and shared responsibility with WLOs, by ensuring shared risk management and providing the necessary support to mitigate the risks faced by WLOs.
- Advocate with donors to streamline application processes and reduce administrative burdens, ensuring WLOs receive fair compensation for indirect costs.

For UN Agencies:
- Create flexible funding structures and redefine risk-sharing mechanisms to enable direct WLO engagement.
- Develop and refine tracking systems [e.g. Humanitarian Response Plans and the Financial Tracking Service of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)] to monitor funding allocations to WLOs, ensuring the availability of data to monitor adherence and improved accountability to Grand Bargain and CTA commitments.

For Donors:
- Transition to multi-year, core funding models that cover essential operational costs for WLOs.
- Harmonise compliance frameworks and invest in equitable partnerships, prioritising feminist principles such as inclusivity, shared responsibility, and co-creation with WLOs, in the adaptation of donor systems.
- Simplify funding application processes, while providing technical assistance to ensure accessibility for WLOs, and actively involve them in shaping these processes.
- Work in partnership with WLOs to ensure equitable access to funding opportunities, rather than fostering competition between WLOs, and include WLOs in governance structures to ensure funds reach them effectively and without harm.
- Invest in capacity building for donor and INGO staff to foster equitable partnerships with WLOs, emphasising local knowledge, grassroots leadership, and feminist principles.
- Redefine risk management approaches, by integrating equal partnership principles, shared responsibility, and governance participation with WLOs.
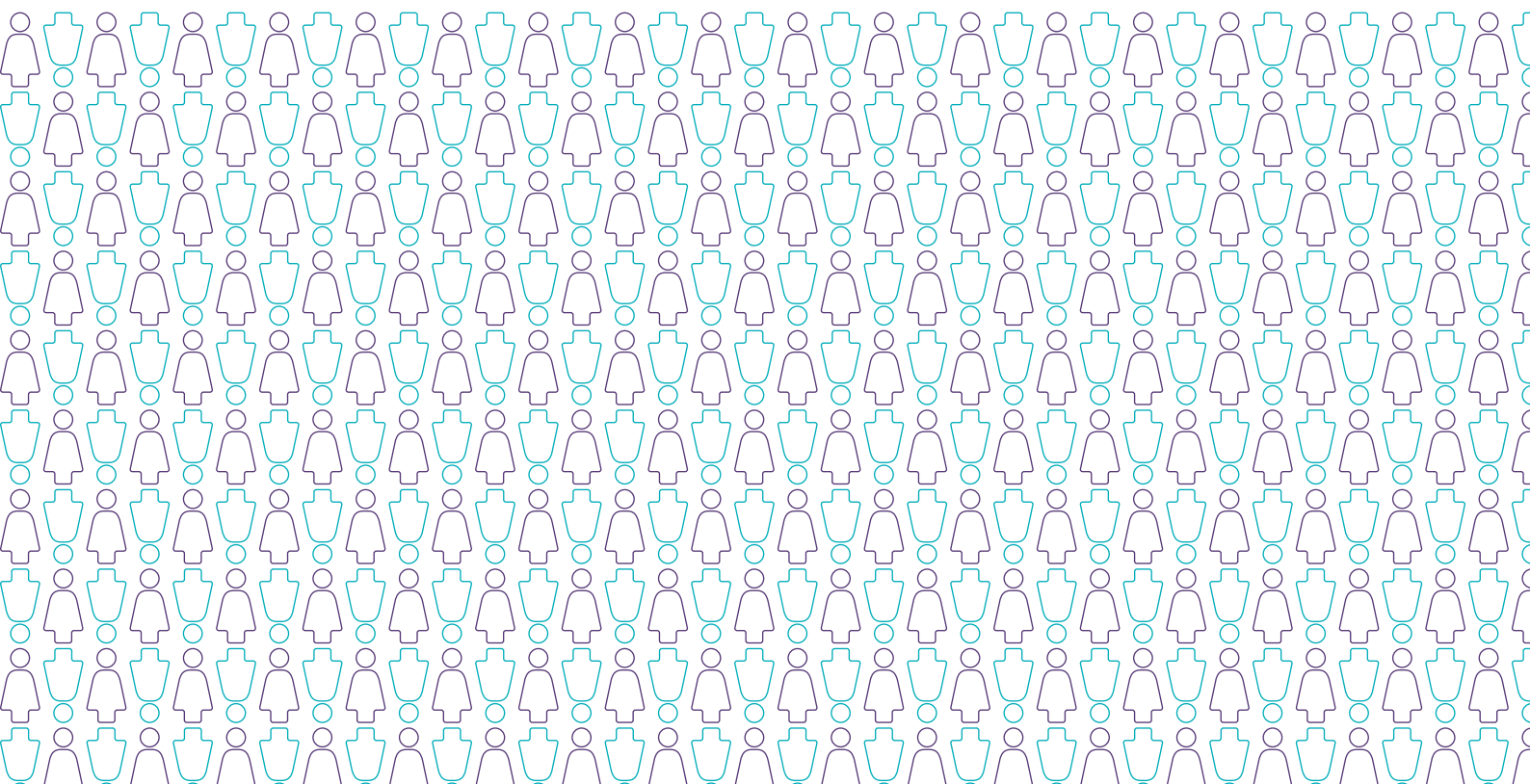
BETWEEN VISIBILITY AND VULNERABILITY:
The Impact of Shrinking Operational and Civic Space

For WLOs, visibility is inseparably tied to their legitimacy, credibility, and capacity to engage meaningfully in humanitarian coordination. They express that being recognised publicly for their contributions has opened doors for advocacy and created new opportunities for partnerships. **Recognition from the state and from survivors also increases trust in the communities, leading survivors to feel more confident to file complaints and seek services**. This visibility allows WLOs to strengthen relationships with government bodies and other humanitarian actors, which in turn improves their operational impact.

WLOs also view visibility as a means of influencing decision-making spaces and enhancing resource mobilisation and organisational sustainability. Some stated that gaining visibility through partnerships with donors and INGOs increases their recognition as key actors within the humanitarian system. Others stated that being visible in coordination spaces signals legitimacy to donors, leading to greater access to funding opportunities. WLOs warn though that visibility without structural change is insufficient. It must be accompanied by meaningful access to coordination structures and decision-making processes, as otherwise visibility may contribute to tokenism.

Despite these positive elements of visibility, WLOs caution that visibility is not always positive, depending on the security context. Several raised concerns about the precarious nature of visibility, adding that it can create vulnerability to manipulation (by state or non-state actors), and exacerbate risks on WLOs, especially in contexts of increasing increasing gender backlash and anti-rights movements.

WLOs Increasingly Under Siege

WLOs report an increase in negative social, political and religious backlash, particularly in contexts with rising anti-gender movements and influential religious institutions; examples are seen in Venezuela, Iraq, Ukraine, Mali and Niger. Similar consequences are reported in countries with military regimes. Additionally, in Colombia, the armed conflict between illegal groups in some regions and the increase in mixed migratory flows from Venezuela have exacerbated the humanitarian crisis, resulting in forced displacements, violence, greater vulnerability for affected communities, and heightened risks for the development of WLO leadership within them. This shrinking operational and civic space is reported as a factor that increases the vulnerability of WLO personnel to targeted violence, and exposes them to undue security and other risks, limiting their ability to fulfill their mandates. Some WLOs reported having to close their offices for a period of time to protect their staff, or that their leaders had to relocate for their own safety, suspend operations, or reformulate or abandon project activities for fear of retaliation by state or non-state actors. The survey conducted with CAFI's WLO network reveals that this **increased exposure to political or social backlash is identified by 67 per cent of respondents, with 50 per cent noting increased vulnerability to targeted violence and 49 per cent citing threats to staff safety**.
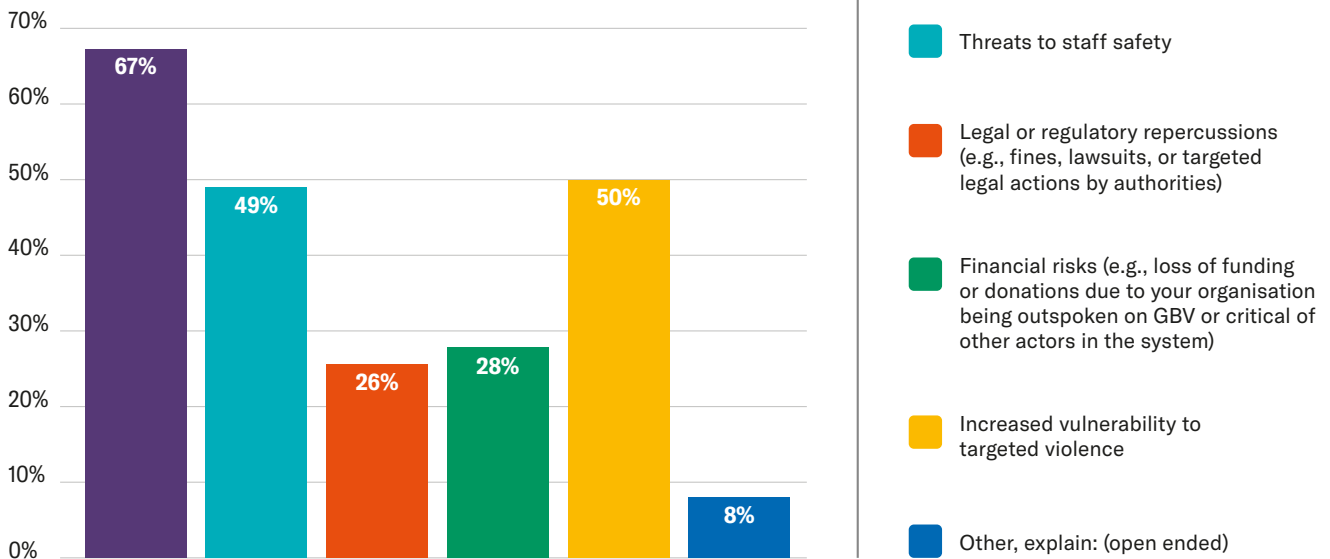
> "
> **We used to have a referral system for GBV survivors, and the referrals used to be done by the government to GBV-serving WLOs. They also used to give information to survivors on how to access services, and WLOs used to be able to provide services inside shelters, courts and prisons, and refugee camps. We were always present and providing services there on the spot, and we used to bring our issues to the cluster, to advocate for better services. Right now, we cannot access shelters except with several permits from the government. Some of these achievements we used to have stayed, but they are much weaker."**
>
> Representative of a WLO, CAFI partner

WLOs Leading with Adaptive Resilience

WLOs report that their immediate coping mechanism to shrinking civic space and restrictions is one of adaptation and flexibility in programming, diversifying their sectors of work, and adopting a low profile while building relationships with communities on the ground. They also report carefully planning for and finding avenues for dialogue and advocacy with state actors and others, where feasible. Amidst this, WLOs report that international humanitarian actors (especially UN agencies) are often cautious bystanders and are reluctant to support WLOs in taking concrete actions to counter the backlash.

Survey question: **What security risks do you face when your organisation takes on leadership roles as a GBV actor in your country?**

- 67% — Increased exposure to political or social backlash
- 49% — Threats to staff safety
- 26% — Legal or regulatory repercussions (e.g., fines, lawsuits, or targeted legal actions by authorities)
- 28% — Financial risks (e.g., loss of funding or donations due to your organisation being outspoken on GBV or critical of other actors in the system)
- 50% — Increased vulnerability to targeted violence
- 8% — Other, explain: (open ended)

Source: Survey with 205 CAFI WLOs, October 2024; own illustration.

> " In the case of [my country], what happens is that the relationship between the humanitarian architecture, through the office of the Humanitarian Coordinator in the country, and the national government, is a tense relationship. We've seen several incidents that have led to partial ruptures in the relationship. So, I believe that the humanitarian architecture in general is very cautious when it comes to addressing these matters. Also, in [my country] an important part of the organisations that are partners in the humanitarian system are organisations that are religion-based. While the humanitarian system in [my country] has maintained a narrative of human rights, we do not see concrete actions in response to this shrinking of operational and civic space."
>
> Representative of a WLO, CAFI partner

In these contexts, increasing WLO visibility is a double-edged sword. Public exposure can enhance protection by highlighting the importance of WLOs' work, while it may also provoke backlash in conservative or volatile contexts. WLOs emphasise the significance of solidarity between WLOs through coalition and alliance-building and working with supportive allies known to them.

Advocacy and Increased Accountability

WLOs and donors recognise the importance of visibility and advocacy to hold the humanitarian system accountable. 💡 WLOs stress the importance of persistent advocacy to hold international actors accountable. 💡 As a CAFI partner reflects, "years of

persistent advocacy have forced international actors to take the participation of WLOs more seriously", increasing their visibility in humanitarian coordination. WLOs actively participate in high-level advocacy platforms, such as the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and CTA Annual Partners Meetings, to build credibility and influence national and international policy on GBV.

💡 WLOs also leverage intersectional advocacy, joining forces with feminist networks to amplify their demands for transparency and accountability. 💡 Through these efforts, WLOs call for sustained, long-term commitments from donors, UN agencies and INGOs to ensure that their participation is not limited to specific projects or sectors but is embedded within broader humanitarian frameworks and ways of working.

Visibility is not just exposure for WLOs — it's a lifeline for legitimacy, advocacy, and influence. Without it, their contributions are often overshadowed or co-opted by larger actors. For WLOs, visibility is power, but it must translate into tangible resources and decision-making access, to avoid becoming a hollow token of recognition. ■

> " Visibility is our credibility, our voice, and our path to sustainability. But it's not enough to be seen; we need to be heard and included in decisions that shape our future."
>
> Representative of a WLO, CAFI partner

📢 Recommendations

For WLOs:
- Exchange with feminist movements globally to counter the anti-gender backlash and strengthen collective advocacy.
- Demand donor support for security training, contingency planning, and staff protection in high-risk contexts.

For INGOs:
- Facilitate dialogue with WLOs on managing risks in challenging environments and advocate for donor support on safety and security.
- Convene spaces for global learning on countering the anti-gender backlash and amplifying women-led and localised responses.
- Engage with WLOs to discuss the specific risks they face due to their work on GBV, and the support they may need to protect their staff and the communities that they support.

For UN Agencies:
- Increase WLOs' visibility in Information Management systems, such as UNHCR's Activity Info, by way of acknowledging their distinct contributions to humanitarian responses.
- Advocate with host governments for localised, rights-based GBV prevention, mitigation and response initiatives.
- Commit to break down barriers to meaningful participation, including through improved communication, translation and access to critical information.

For Donors:
- Support safety and contingency planning for WLO staff in conflict zones.
- Support capacity building to host governments on GBV, and fund research on the social, economic, and health consequences of GBV.
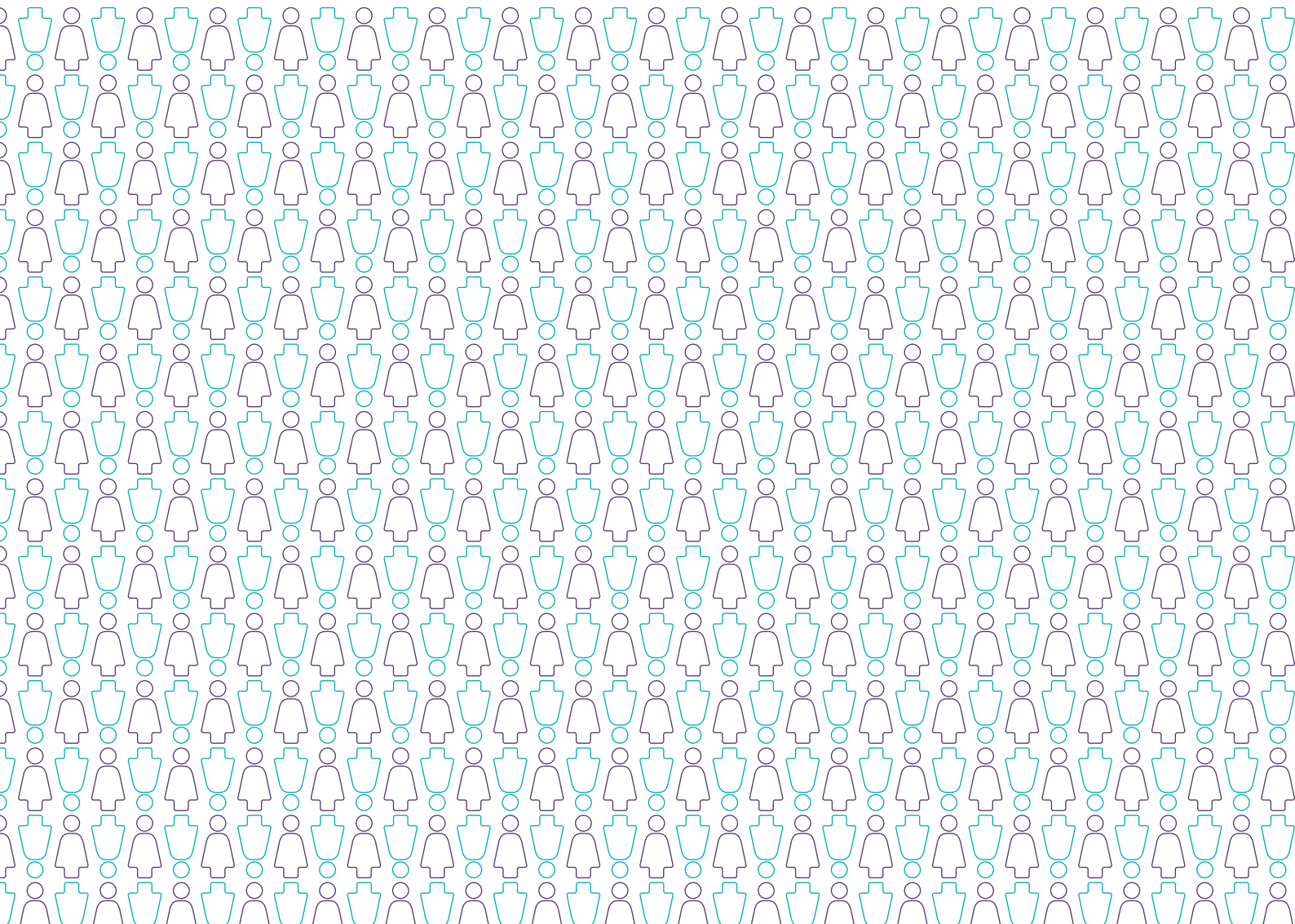
BREAKING BARRIERS AND PAVING THE WAY

This report highlights a vision for change. A future where WLOs are empowered, supported, and treated as equal partners integral to humanitarian action. When WLOs lead, humanitarian responses become more inclusive, sustainable, and aligned with the real needs and rights of affected communities, including women and girls. **Meaningful participation and local leadership represent the path to tackling the root causes and consequences of GBV in emergencies**, ensuring support and protection that deeply resonate with the lives of those affected.

The advocacy messages presented in this report are anchored in women's voices, aspirations, and zest for an alternative 'way of doing'. They outline actionable, impactful changes that can create a more inclusive and supportive humanitarian landscape for WLOs. The recommendations centre on working towards a more just distribution of power, more equitable partnerships and resource allocation, promoting more inclusive decision-making, and increasing transparency. The path to realising this vision requires bold steps from international humanitarian actors, such as:

- **Donors** must re-imagine their funding approaches and provide multi-year, core and flexible funding, to enhance the sustainability, strategic growth, and resilience of WLOs. They also hold significant influence in re-shaping risk-frameworks and emphasising equitable partnerships.

- **UN agencies** must work to decentralise power in humanitarian spaces, foster inclusive platforms that intentionally break down barriers, and forge pathways for WLOs to take on leadership roles.

- **INGOs** must rise up to the challenge of becoming true allies to WLOs, sharing power, capacity, resources and knowledge, and advocacy platforms to amplify WLOs' voices and representation in humanitarian fora.

When WLOs lead, humanitarian responses become rooted in local contexts, ensuring more effective prevention and protection for the women and girls affected, in ways that resonate and sustain. By addressing the barriers identified in this report – unequal power dynamics, insufficient funding, limited accountability, and shrinking operational spaces – a humanitarian system that empowers WLOs to lead and transform lives sustainably, is possible. This vision calls for **courage, collaboration, and a commitment to rethinking power for more sustained and lasting change** – a path forward that seeks to bring meaningful, compassionate, and effective support to women and girls worldwide. ◼

ANNEX

Ethical and Inclusion Considerations

The consultant team's approach in this research is anchored in research ethics, feminist approaches and principles, emphasizing at least five different aspects.

Firstly, **the safety of all individuals** (respondents and researchers) during the study. Respondents' safety was prioritised above any other consideration and considered carefully throughout the research. The team's approach centred on the needs of the respondents, who know best the contexts in which they work and the risks they might run while participating in the study. This entailed, among others, that participants were informed of the intended purpose of and all steps of the study, and freely chose to participate or not, in it, including the possibility to interrupt their participation anytime they desired.

Secondly, **anonymity and confidentiality** are at the centre of our approach, and our standard approach was to uphold the privacy of each participant or stakeholder. This means, among others, that data from research participants was anonymised before being used in this final report, except in specific cases where an insight, practice or example is presented, for which the consultant team sought the express consent of the respondent, for its inclusion in this report.

Thirdly, the consultant team upheld a **do-no-harm approach**. This means that the team considered that the research process might have unintended negative impacts on the respondents and their organisations. The team strived to minimise the potential harm of engaging in this research, among other things, by anticipating and discussing potential risks and threats at the beginning of each contact with the respondents.

Beyond the do-no-harm approach, the consultant team also implemented a **do-some-good approach**. The team believes that the purpose of doing research is to positively contribute to achieving social justice and improving the lives of the research participants or stakeholders, and the communities in which they live, including through political action and engagement with policy-making processes. Put differently, the consultant team ensured that stakeholders do not just share information, but that they also gain from the process. Expectations and needs about the study were therefore mentioned to the research participants in the beginning of the survey, KIIs, and workshops.

Fourthly, **transparency** was important to the consultant team. At the start of the survey, KIIs, and workshops,

participants were informed of the purpose, nature, and uses of the research.

Moreover, **equity in access** was maintained throughout the research. To confirm whether KII respondents and survey and workshop participants experienced any barriers during the data collection, the consultant team collected information about ethics, inclusion, and accessibility issues, prior to launching the data collections. Feedback was sought from CARE Deutschland e.V. regarding power dynamics between research participants, presence of disabilities, language barriers and preferences, objections to KIIs and workshops being recorded, access to the internet and ability to answer a short-written survey on the laptop or phone, and security and safety considerations. Specific adjustments were done by the consultant team to redress any inequity issues highlighted by CARE Deutschland e.V. and the CAFI partners.

Apart from the above principles, which underpinned the consultant team's work, the team was committed to CARE Deutschland e.V. policies, such as safeguarding and the prevention of fraud and corruption.

Methodology

This report's design leveraged a feminist methodology, which actively sought to empower, enable, and inspire the women involved. For the desk review, the consultant team reviewed key documents relating to the humanitarian and FFP discourses, including the CTA Road Map 2021-2025, the Guidelines of the GFFO's Feminist Foreign Policy, guidelines, and reports from the IASC and Grand Bargain, among others, as well as CAFI project documents. The study employed a multi-pronged approach to generate and triangulate data to support the objectives of this assignment. In the data collection phase, KIIs were held with twelve staff from the eleven CAFI partners from all nine partner countries in LAC, WCA, MENA, and Ukraine, three CTA signatory donors (including Germany and France), as well as staff from two INGOs that are CTA signatories.

KIIs with partners in MENA were facilitated in Arabic, with WCA in French, with Ukraine in Ukrainian, and with LAC in English with simultaneous Spanish/English interpretation.

An online survey with 205 WLOs from the national CAFI networks in all regions was also conducted, whereby the survey was shared with all WLOs in the networks. The survey was translated into French, Spanish, Ukrainian, and Arabic and administered in these

languages. Out of the WLOs, 45 responded from LAC (out of 49), 42 from MENA (out of 51), 28 from WCA (out of 64), and 25 from Ukraine (out of 36). Given that the response rate from WCA and Ukraine represents 44 per cent and 69 per cent (respectively) of the WLOs in the WCA and the Ukraine networks, the results from WCA and Ukraine need to be interpreted with caution.

Following the survey and the KIIs, the consultant team held a workshop entitled 'collective learning space', whereby CAFI partners participated in a deep dive reflection into the study's preliminary findings. This was followed by a second workshop where the CAFI partners and the consultant team co-created advocacy messages to galvanize momentum for advocacy. The findings and recommendations were validated and refined in an additional workshop at the margins of the CTA Annual Partners' Meeting (in November 2024) in Berlin. CARE Deutschland e.V. contractors provided simultaneous interpretation in French and Spanish for all workshops. Throughout the research, CAFI partners closely accompanied the process in every step, by providing feedback to the consultant team on the research design, data collection tools, report drafts, and participating actively in the co-creation and refining of the advocacy messages used in this report.

The consultant team analysed the survey responses, conducted content and thematic analyses of the qualitative data from the KIIs and the workshops, and triangulated them to capture main trends and unanticipated themes and patterns and frame advocacy priorities in this report.

Complete survey results and data collection tools

The full dataset of the survey results and the data collection tools are provided in a separate annex file, which can be accessed here.

Challenges and Limitations

The study has a limitation emanating from the unequal access to resources, information, and networks among WLOs in the CAFI project's network. Only a few participating WLOs are CTA signatories, granting them privileged access to information about donor priorities, funding trends, and decision-making spaces. This advantage may have shaped their perspectives on and expectations about 'meaningful participation'. In contrast, most other WLOs in the study, who are not CTA signatories, may have more limited access to information, resources and networks, which may have made their perspectives and expectations about meaningful participation different. Despite these disparities, the consultant team made every effort to ensure diverse perspectives were captured throughout the data collection.

The representativeness and generalisability of the survey findings at the level of each region evolved as a key challenge in the study. In particular, the WCA region had a very low response rate, at 44 per cent (28 WLOs out of the 64 WLOs in WCA). A similar but relatively less acute challenge was encountered in Ukraine, where 69 per cent of the WLOs responded (25 WLOs out of 36). This means that while region-level data from the LAC and MENA regions are representative of the perceptions of WLOs in the CAFI network from those two regions, the data emanating from WLOs in WCA and in Ukraine need to be interpreted with caution.

The digital divide, particularly for WLOs located in remote or resource-constrained areas, posed a significant obstacle. Many organisations, especially those operating close to conflict zones, have limited access to reliable internet or technology, which made participation in online surveys, KIIs, and the two follow-up online workshops challenging. To address this, the survey was designed to be mobile-friendly, and participants were given ten days to complete the survey, to account for intermittent internet access. Despite these efforts, there remains the possibility that some WLOs may have been unable to participate due to these logistical constraints.

In addition, security concerns, workload issues, and data collection fatigue posed a risk to the quality and completeness of the responses. Many respondents are burdened by heavy workloads in crisis environments, repetitive requests for insights and data from various actors, and the possibility of surveillance by state actors, which may have forced them to provide rush or incomplete answers or potentially affected the openness and candour of their answers. To mitigate this, the survey was kept concise and focused, respondents were reminded of the value and impact of their contributions and asked to prioritise their security and safety when answering questions.

Additionally, a potential response bias may have been introduced as respondents might have felt compelled to align with donor or INGO expectations rather than offering their true perspectives. This is particularly common when power dynamics influence what is perceived as the 'right' answer. To mitigate this, the team used indirect questioning techniques and triangulated data from multiple sources—KIIs, surveys, three workshops with CAFI partners (one of which was held in-person), and the desk review - to validate and confirm findings. Special care was taken, especially but not only during the in-person workshop, to create a safe space for open feedback, reassuring participants that the research aimed to reflect their voices, not judge their insights.

Finally, a limitation in the data collection process was that among the signatories of the CTA, only three donors (including the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs in the Government of France, and GFFO) and only two INGOs were interviewed (and no UN agencies). The opinions of these organisations cannot fully represent the diverse perspectives of donors and INGOs. ■

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CAFI

CALL TO ACTION FIELD IMPLEMENTATION

CAFI