IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS

A call for a global alliance to support
Women's Rights Organizations (WRO)

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Cover photo: Portrait of Toyoba Khatun* in front of her tent in the Rohingya refugee camp. She is one of the beneficiaries of contactless washing device provided by Oxfam. She along other community members of her are regularly washing hands by the device to fight againt corona virus. Rohingya refugee camp, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

*Name changed to protect identity

Credit: Fabeha Monir/Oxfam GB

CONTENTS

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WOMEN AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, Oxfam[1] conducted a rapid global survey with partners and allies in the women's rights sector to understand the impact of this unprecedented global health crisis on women's rights and feminist organizations and networks[2], and the communities with whom they work.

There were no doubts going into this research that the responses would be only a snapshot of the true extent of the sector's dire situation. Organizations at the forefront of the fight for gender justice – especially those in the Global South – have consistently been the most underfunded, despite increasing donor commitments to fighting gender inequality[3].

The sharp fallout of a global pandemic on WROs did not come as a surprise and we saw our hypothesis of diminishing financial resources and closures of organizations sadly confirmed;

33% had to lay off anywhere between 1 and 10 members and 9% of organizations have faced closure.

This response came in eight months into the pandemic and lockdowns, so it is most likely this number will only increase as the situation continues.

However, we also saw unexpected results from our research. The most surprising result was a near-unanimous concern at not being able to access decision and policy-

making spaces – whether due to travel restrictions, closing civic space, or not being seen as partners in the global pandemic response.

This is a clear indication of the need for a roadmap for those working in this sector towards a more equitable partnership model and support system, addressing both financial resources and political and civic space.

These findings are a clear and loud call, not only for an increase in core and sustainable funding, including institutional funding to preserve the sector that has been at the heart of gender and societal gains for decades and to prevent further backsliding in gender equality, but also an unequivocal demand for better partnership and meaningful participation in decision-making at all levels for organizations and their members.

It is a resounding message to donors, governments, partner International Non-Governmental organizations – and anyone relying on Women's Rights Organizations to maintain gender gains – that global and collective commitments be made to deliver a practical and sustainable way forward.

Hence, given the disproportionate impact that this pandemic is having on women and their communities, the main recommendations from this research delineate a path towards a global commitment to make space – and provide the adequate core support and resources – for Women's Rights Organizations to take a leadership role in any COVID recovery decisions, and in partnerships for programming and policy-setting. This is of utmost importance since the world is at a

critical juncture, with important and rapid transformations happening in our political, social and economic models. Feminist and women's organizations, who are acknowledged as central to civic space through their presence, diversity, dynamism and capacity for proposal, need to be at the decision-making tables.

METHODOLOGY

The survey was conducted in four languages (English, French, Spanish, and Arabic) and distributed across the Oxfam Confederation, as well as to external ally networks. A total number of 248 organizations responded to the survey[4]; however, once the data was analyzed – based on the question to self-identify as a WRO and adherence to the definition used – the final number of WROs was 222.

The survey was validated with all respondents and allies such as the Equality Fund and the International Women's Development Association (IWDA)

KEY FINDINGS OF THE RAPID GLOBAL SURVEY

The survey highlighted that organizations are being affected in four key areas due to the pandemic: shrinking access to decision-making spaces, funding and resourcing, operational and logistical problems, and mental health and social impacts. Taking the survey answers in composite, we found that the majority of organizations perceived an important difficulty related to the inability to access decision and policy-making spaces due to travel restrictions, shrinking civic space, not being seen as key partners in the response and recovery, and because of funding restrictions and financial hardship. Changes to their funding streams and operating budgets have made it difficult to meet the rising immediate and long-term needs of communities, while they are scrambling to adapt to a new and remote working reality.

The organizations consulted noted that this is particularly concerning in the present context. They remarked the communities they serve are experiencing broader gendered challenges such as increases in gender-based violence, difficulty accessing health care, in particular reproductive health, food security, income and social protection. The organizations highlighted how important it is to build sustainable and resilient organizational structures that will withstand the crisis and promote a feminist transformation in economic and social models aligned with gender and climate justice.

Ana Dario is very happy with her new dress. She likes fashion and is very sad she lost all her clothes in the cyclone. "Our house just collapsed on top of all our belongings. Micas Mondlane / Oxfam Novib

TOP CHALLENGES

A review of the key challenges and gaps that organizations have experienced as a result of COVID-19 revealed four major themes:

1. Funding and resourcing

A majority of respondents (60%) cited a lack of funding or staff to maintain operations or respond to community needs, while 25% specifically noted the challenge of diverting their own resources and facilities to support a broader health response. In response to whether organizations had experienced any drop in their budget since the start of the pandemic, 26% of respondents said that they had experienced 25-50% drop. Twenty organizations (9%) have had to face complete closure. When asked what gaps and shifts the pandemic had revealed, many described funding and resource- related challenges, such as the "need to diversify funding in case donors abruptly pull out due to pandemic." Some organizations noted the need to shift how funding is allocated, for example to "extend the number of training/workshop days to avoid gatherings of many people", and to address the underlying issues that are being exacerbated as a result of lockdowns such as the "rise in violence against women and girls [which has] increased our budget to support their needs."

2. Shrinking access to decision-making spaces

Almost an equal number of respondents (59%) noted that a core challenge was that travel restrictions made it difficult to access key policy and decision-making spaces. For example, respondents noted that there is an "Inability to travel to sites where young women in vulnerable zones live", nor "to bring the young women to policy spaces especially online spaces." At the same time there is a "lack of resources for mobilizing and organizing young women"; revealing a longer term "need to form a way to collaborate with other stakeholders to regain support, services, and advocating for vulnerable groups directly and indirectly." Beyond the logistical challenges of accessing key policy and decision-making spaces, 33% of respondents also noted that they are not invited to be part of these conversations because they are not perceived as key stakeholders in response and recovery efforts. The result of this has been a lack of gender-responsive and women-centred reactions to the pandemic. For example, one respondent noted, "Whilst we are in health care, we are not considered essential services. Women are being diagnosed with breast cancer even whilst in the pandemic require esteem solutions and other interventions that we are versed in providing."

3. Operational problems

Many organizations noted operational challenges related to COVID-19, with 49% citing lack of strong logistical and administrative support (i.e., space to work, internet connection, and mobility), 39% a decrease in productivity, and 33% employee layoffs. Several respondents noted that program implementation has had to shift as a result of the pandemic, with "Reduced monitoring visits due to travel restrictions" at the same time that staff have had to "adopt working from home as an alternative to the usual physical working in the office." Several highlighted the gaps in technology and need for other set ups that would ensure "staff capacity at work and home."

4. Mental health and social impact

Mental health and social struggles also emerged as challenges for organizations and people working for them. The respondents pointed to growing demand on their organizations and staff with less resources, with 37% noting staff mental health issues and burnout and 35% noting child/family care responsibilities. Respondents identified the need to "strengthen and increase psychosocial counselling" and to address social and emotional issues such as "[women's] uncompensated care work", and "lack of self and collective care policies for NGO workers." All this affects as well the sustainability of the organizations and their ability to maximize impact towards gender equality, in their areas of work and communities.

GROWING PRESSURE ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS BECAUSE OF THE GENDERED IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC

Beyond the challenges that COVID-19 has posed for organizational operations, programming and mission, respondents also noted broader impacts of COVID-19 that they see affecting the communities with which they work. These include the following:

1. Gender-Based Violence and Violence Against Women and Girls

Increased Gender-Based Violence: Many respondents noted that the pandemic has increased incidents of GBV, leaving women and girls more vulnerable and at increased need for a "safe space." This was an expected result, given the global reports of the "shadow pandemic"[5] of violence against women and girls. In response to this global humanitarian crisis, some respondents urged for support to survivors and "social protection measures" to be taken into account in stimulus or response packages that "reflect an understanding of women's special circumstances and recognition of the care economy," as well as building those social protection measures into organizations' long-term strategies.

2. Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights & Mental Health

Difficulty in accessing health care: With health systems stretched in every corner of the world, and resources being diverted towards the pandemic response, women, girls, adolescents, LGBTQIA2S+ people, people with disabilities are at a particular risk of restricted access to unique health services[6]. Survey respondents suggested fears of a "lack of reproductive health services, food and hygiene kits and an increase of GBV, and child marriage"; "School closures which expose adolescent girls to teen pregnancy"; and a fear that "women will be left out in accessing COVID-19 vaccine." There is an intersectional perspective to all these phenomena, with racialized and rural, women and girls in poverty being more exposed to these negative impacts.

Long-term mental health challenges: Across all geographies and languages, respondents noted the need to address mental health and burnout in the long term, including a need for "Mental health monitoring", "supporting those who have lost work due to the pandemic with both physical and mental health" and "Coping

with mental stress due to COVID-19." The mental load related to lack of access to health care, income, burden of care work is again disproportionate for racialized women and girls and those from poor communities.

3. Livelihoods, women's poverty and economic justice

Economic justice to support women-headed households: The pandemic reveals existing issues of gendered economic injustice. For example, as one respondent noted, "Women headed poor households live on daily income [and] are in severe condition. They do not have scope to earn from any other sources; neither can go out to look for jobs, run their business because all the activities outside homes are completely stopped [and there is an] increased work load for women."

Food Security: The World Food Programme (WFP) estimated that the number of people experiencing crisis level hunger would rise to 270 million by the end of 2020 as a result of the pandemic, an 82% increase since 2019 . Many respondents also expressed this fear, asserting the "Need to explore long term projects on Safety [protection], Livelihood and Food security" and the challenges caused by "The economic crunch "such as "increase in petroleum products and the attendant inflationary pressure of everyday needs of the household have left our stakeholders struggling for common food for survival." These economic issues are even more prevalent amongst racialized and rural women living in poverty before the 'economic crunch'.

4. Organizational Resources

Financial distribution: 56 out of 222 organizations responded that they had to divert their resources and facilities to support the broader health response. However, given that lobbying for core funding remains one of the top items under feminist funding advocacy, there is already a shortage of donors that are providing core funding for future survival. For example, respondents noted that "Emergency grant funding should be a component of project/programme funding agreements for immediate draw down [withdrawal] if necessary"; that there has been a need for "Reallocation of budget to response of COVID which in turn resulted to paralyses of other health services especially to women and children need"; and that "Donor's interest and support [has been] diverted/changed."

Technology access and training featured prominently, which was unsurprising given the heavy reliance on virtual platforms and work at this time. Respondents noted that "Access to digital space determines quality of life," and that they need "Technical support and resources for strategic planning."

Preparing for future emergencies was also a core concern for many who noted that COVID-19 will not be the only challenge WROs experience in the years ahead. As a result, they suggested we must collectively "Develop culturally relevant emergency tools and responses to crisis management with a template for implementation," and prioritize "Remote intervention and response training."

BUILDING A GLOBAL ALLIANCE

RECOMMENDATION

COVID-19 and the crises we all face have provided a key opening for transformative work on gender justice. We are at a tipping point; we can either advance into new and bold territory of meaningful transformation for women and LGBTQIA2S+ people, and for societies at large, or we can see gender justice rolled back 25 years[7], as part of a broader rise and reinforcement of authoritarianism and ideologies and systems promoting gender and socio-economic inequality and exclusion.

Research has shown that gender equality gains are largely lost post-conflict or post-crisis periods as societal focus shifts to more vertical, traditional, patriarchal "nation building" as a whole. When a society manages to avoid this pitfall, it is thanks to the presence of strong and unified women's rights movements, which support the rising needs of vulnerable populations during and post-crisis, and in turn influence public opinion and decision makers[8].

Women's Rights and Feminist Organizations and actors worldwide are facing severe challenges and struggles to continue their work or even remain active. Communities depend on these organizations to support economic, social and political inclusion and justice in issues as diverse as livelihoods, protection from violence, or access to information. They are also often first responders to crises.

Fatoumata Tangara, 14, smiles as she holds a megaphone she uses to campaign as peer educator. She says that when she grows up, she wants to continue to advocate against child marriage and work from within her community. Credit: Laeïla Adjovi/Oxfam Novib

The global consequences of losing or weakening women's organizations and networks cannot be overstated. Therefore, we propose the following recommendations to policy-makers and donors, as well as fellow organizations in this sector who collaborate with and rely on Women's Rights Organizations in their work.

EQUITABLE AND FEMINIST PARTNERSHIPS

The relationship between Global North organizations and governments and WROs in the Global South remains top-down. Donor-beneficiary relationships carry colonial practices and dictates that do not show an understanding of the local context in which WROs are operating. Donors – specifically governments and foundations but also international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) – need to move towards a more equitable partnership model that respects the autonomy and voice of partner WROs, and their capacities to deliver programming and aid according to the needs of their communities. What this means concretely is a shift within Global North INGOs, foundations and governments to adapt their own bureaucracies and models of operation to accommodate WRO needs for flexible funding and capacities, not vice versa as is the status quo. In the context of this pandemic, according to the respondents, access to all relevant decision-making and policy-setting spaces (including virtual) has become an even more privileged notion, in which policymakers and government officials hold closed meetings which exclude civil society.

WROs must be recognized and consistently promoted as the holders of knowledge and lived experience, and their partners – whether in government or INGOs – must prioritize that knowledge in decision and policy-making spaces. Concretely, that may mean building resources into projects and partnerships that enable members of WROs to be present physically or virtually, as appropriate, in every context where decisions pertaining to funding, policy, and influencing on gender justice are being taken.

In terms of responses as to what the sector needs to change in order to address the issue of feminist partnerships, some organizations included the following proposals:

- Create space for directly affected individuals and social groups to tell their stories and share their struggles. Promote the inclusion and representation of people working in grassroots organizations and recognize their participation. Open up spaces for individuals to talk by themselves and not others speaking in the name of.

- Facilitate cooperation between official institutions and NGOs providing services to victims of GBV.

- Greater coordination between state and civil society so that women are not overly burdened.

IMMEDIATE AND EASILY ACCESSIBLE RELIEF FUNDING

According to a Canadian survey on the impact of COVID on the domestic women's rights sector[9], 39% of responding WROs noted that they were not able to access any government funding as their work and needs did not meet the funding criteria, highlighting a systemic structural failure from funders.

Operating on shoestring budgets already, the extra administrative burden of these programs combined with the increased demand for services, makes these benefit programs out of reach. As such, there is a need for immediate and easily accessible relief funding. As seen in this global survey, the same challenges are being voiced:

- [Challenges] dealing with financing agencies in terms of lack of flexibility and also stopping funding.

- 1) Implementation modality has changed (canceled field activities) 2. Priority of the government has changed (VAW bill is not able to adopt); so, related works need to be cancelled 3. Clients/donors interest has shifted.

- Technical assistance for a better participation of the Association in the rounds of negotiations and drafting of grants from the Global Fund. Need for funding to support the technical staff involved in the design of projects.

SUSTAINABLE AND CORE INSTITUTIONAL RESOURCING

We are suggesting increasing the proportion of long-term, core and flexible funding support provided directly to local WROs, in order to support meaningful and transformative change for gender equality. In addition to financial resourcing, there is a need to ensure the provision of extended time frames, human resource support, and logistical accompaniment or support to prevent burnout and create space for members to focus on program delivery and policy-setting.

Furthermore, co-financing by some donors needs to be eliminated, in particular at this time, given the inability of many Southern-

based, local organizations to meet this requirement. More concretely, as some respondents stated:

- Modify criteria for funding and include core expenses cover; small NGOs and CSOs most of the time are the ones creating a direct positive change on these issues and most of the time do not meet the criteria of UN agencies funds and other donors, or the fact of not covering administrative costs implies for them not being able to apply for funds.

- Capacity-building, digitalization of activities, increase in technical support, in financing materials, security for women, internet connection, human resources competent for communication on social media, need for graphic designers because 80% of activities have become virtual etc.

- Weak collective responsibility due to limited resources, lack of support from the Gender Ministry, lack of a multi-sectoral response, lack of consultation and support of CSO's by Government.

LONG-TERM EMPOWERMENT AND MOVEMENT-BUILDING COMMITMENTS

At the moment, funding practices by donors and partnership models by INGOs create competition and division among women's movements, especially due to the scarcity of funding. Here, some responsibility falls on donors and international NGOs and women's rights actors on the global stage to make space and remove barriers for – as one respondent stated – "local women rights activist to boldly speak out to the policymakers to put down some measures to minimize domestic violence and gender-based violence," among other issues.

In the humanitarian context, there needs to be a concerted push for the inclusion of Women's Rights Organizations or women local leaders in responses to any and all crises, including ensuring that mechanisms are in place to engage with women leaders and women-led organizations to inform humanitarian decision-making. Practically, this could mean peer-to-peer accompaniment by larger, more experienced civil society partners for local women's rights actors/organizations/informal networks to ensure inclusion of knowledge and skill transfer.

- Increased funding and capacity building of women led organization.

- [Need for] business and social entrepreneurship.

- The pandemic has revealed that social networks are an important means of social mobilization.

GLOBAL ALLIANCE FOR WOMEN RIGHTS ORGANISATIONS' LEADERSHIP ON GENDER JUSTICE

Finally, the proposed way forward is to co-develop a multi-stakeholder 'global alliance' on funding feminist movements to support WROs and shift the power structures in their favour. Given the future of this sector, this proposal should be taken as the key long-term recommendation for structural and transformative change within the development and humanitarian sectors, when it comes to meaningful gender justice support.

The Nobinboron Youth Forum is a group of 15 women, with various backgrounds and goals, who gather and create beautiful jute products. Credit: Syed Tasfiq Mahmood / Oxfam Novib

FOOTNOTES

1. Specifically, Oxfam Canada, Oxfam America, and Oxfam International staff, and with collective support from across the Oxfam Confederation's Gender Justice Community.

2. For the purposes of this survey, we define women's rights and feminist organizations and actors as local and national organizations, activists and movements which are women-led/governed, whose core mandate is advancing women's rights and gender justice, and have a rights-based, transformative and intersectional approach. These can be organized and registered organizations, but also loose networks of women's rights/feminist activists. We recognize the importance of a transformative approach and an intersectional analysis and therefore have made clear in our outreach that our definition of women's rights and feminist organizations includes those that support and advance the rights of LGBTQIA2S+ people, racialized women and girls, indigenous women and girls, etc. The intent in the design and dissemination was to reach and include organizations that focus on gender justice and have an intersectional and rights-based approach to their mandate. Survey results showed that many organizations are explicitly focused on women, girls, and gender non-conforming people whose identities intersect with other forms of social oppression.

3. July 2nd 2009. Kasia Staszewka, Tenzin Dolker and Kellea Miller 'Only 1% of gender equality funding is going to women's organisations – why? *The Guardian*. Available online at: https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/jul/02/gender-equality-support-1bn-boost-how-to-spend-it

4. 135 in English, 66 in Spanish, 39 in French and 8 in Arabic. Please note, some organizations are unable to identify publicly as WROs, and so a judgment call was made based on some of the answers to other questions, such as the adherence to feminist principles in the organization's work or mandate, to include these organizations as WROs.

5. Mayssam Zaaroura and Farwah Qasim. May 12th 2020. *The invisible pandemic that's been years in the making*. Available online at: https://www.oxfam.ca/blog/the-invisible-pandemic-thats-been-years-in-the-making/

6. No date. Thrive Coalition. Covid 19 and the Thrive Agenda. https://www.actioncanadashr.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/COVID-19%20and%20Thrive%20Agenda-ENG-v4.pdf

7. Sandrine Lungumbu and Amelia Butterly. November 26th 2020. 'Coronavirus and gender: More chores for women set back gains in equality'. *BBC News*. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-55016842

8. Bop, Codou. 2001. "Women in Conflict, Their Gains and Their Losses." *In The Aftermath: Women in Post-Conflict Transformation*, edited by Shelia Meintjes, Anu Pillay, and Meredeth Turshen, 19–34. London: Zed Books.

9. Conducted at the same time as the global survey, by the YWCA Canada, Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAW), Canadian Women's Foundation, G(irls)20 and Oxfam Canada. December 15, 2020. YWCA Canada, CRIAW, CWF, G(irls)20 and Oxfam Canada: *Over half of Canadian women's sector organizations forced to reduce or cancel vital services, new survey reveals*. Available online at: https://www.oxfam.ca/news/over-half-of-canadian-womens-sector-organizations-forced-to-reduce-or-cancel-vital-services-new-survey-reveals/