



Panel Session

Seeing the Unseen : The Critical Role of Women's Rights Organisations in Humanitarian Response. Approaches, Effectiveness, and Sustainability

Sandra Macias del Villar (Co-Director, Alliance for Feminist Movements & Feminist Humanitarian Network), **Megan Daigle** (Senior Research Fellow, Overseas Development Institute), **Nazik Awad** (Founder, Sudanese Women Rights Action), **Vinita Rahasranaman**, (Co-Lead, Urgent Action Fund Asia and Pacific) and **Salma Sakr** (Weaver, Global Resilience Fund) discussed the need for greater visibility, recognition, and sustainable support for women's rights organisations. They discussed the importance of bridging the divide between humanitarian aid and human rights.

The discussion on the critical role of women's rights organisations in humanitarian response began with **Sandra Macias del Villar** addressing the urgent need for women-led organisations to be better supported in the face of global crises. Sandra highlighted the stark contrast between the immense value these organisations bring and the meager financial support they receive, noting that only **3.1% of gender-specific humanitarian funding** is allocated to women's rights and women-led organisations. She emphasised the importance of shifting away from the traditional, siloed



approaches in humanitarian work and advocated for a more inclusive and flexible funding model that acknowledges the unique strengths of local, women-led initiatives.

Megan Daigle expanded on Sandra's remarks by delving into the **systemic underfunding and exclusion** of women-led organisations (WLOs) from the wider humanitarian sector. She underscored the essential role these organisations play as **first responders**, often providing immediate relief when international aid actors are unable to access affected areas. Megan pointed out that despite their deep community connections, WLOs frequently face challenges in **securing resources** primarily due to their exclusion from mainstream funding



Panel Session

streams. She stressed that to effectively address this gap, there must be a fundamental shift in how the sector perceives and supports these organisations.

The conversation then moved to **Nazik Awad** who offered a vivid portrayal of the current crisis in Sudan. She described how women-led organisations have been at the **forefront of relief efforts** in the absence of international humanitarian aid, particularly in a conflict zone where basic services have collapsed. Despite operating under life-threatening conditions, these organisations continue to deliver critical services, including **community kitchens and healthcare**. Nazik argued that the international community must recognise the crucial role of local, women-led organisations, and provide them with the necessary resources to scale their efforts and sustain their operations in the long term.

Salma Sakr highlighted the importance of supporting youth and girl-led organisations, which are often among the first responders to crises. Salma explained that these groups, although not always recognised as traditional humanitarian actors, play a vital role in **ensuring the dignity and rights** of those affected by crises. She pointed out that their work often extends beyond immediate relief, addressing **long-term needs** such as access to safe abortions, healthcare, and other rights that are typically sidelined by conventional humanitarian responses. Salma also stressed that these organisations are grounded in care

and solidarity, making them uniquely equipped to navigate crises with a **community-centered approach**.

Vinita Rahasranaman provided insights into the challenges of responding to crises in **politically complex environments** like Myanmar. She spoke about the importance of rapid-response funding mechanisms that prioritise the needs of grassroots organisations, especially in situations where international agencies face **significant barriers to access**. Vinita highlighted the flexibility and speed with which women-led organisations can respond, as they are often deeply embedded in the affected communities. She emphasised that **long-term support** is also essential, particularly in protracted crises, to prevent burnout and ensure that these organisations can continue their vital work.

The panel concluded with a collective call to action for the humanitarian sector to evolve and better **support women's rights organisations**. The speakers agreed that there is a need for radical change in how funding and support are structured, focusing on the effectiveness of local, women-led efforts. They discussed the importance of bridging the divide between **humanitarian aid and human rights**, advocating for a holistic approach that recognises the interconnectedness of these issues. The conversation highlighted the need for greater collaboration, solidarity, and trust to support women and youth leading crisis response with care, resilience, and hope.



Panel Session



"We need radical partnerships, radical trust, and radical solidarity to effectively address the world's crises."

Sandra Macias del Villar

Co-Director, Alliance for Feminist Movements & Feminist Humanitarian Network

"Women-led organisations are first responders, but their work is often invisibilised by the humanitarian sector."

Megan Daigle

Senior Research Fellow, Overseas Development Institute



"Local responders, particularly women-led organisations, are the best frontline responders. They know their communities and are always first on the ground."

Nazik Awad

Founder, Sudanese Women Rights Action

"Girls and young feminists are redefining crisis response, focusing on dignity, rights, and long-term care."

Salma Sakr

Weaver, Global Resilience Fund



"We need to create a funding mechanism that responds rapidly to crises while supporting the long-term needs of women-led organisations."

Vinita Sahasranaman

Co-Lead, Urgent Action Fund Asia and Pacific



Critical Action Steps



Increase funding for women's rights organisations, which currently receive only 3.1% of gender-specific humanitarian funding.



Ensure flexible funding mechanisms to support local women-led organisations without rigid requirements.



Foster international partnerships that prioritise grassroots organisations and youth-led responses to crises.



Recognise and amplify the work of women's rights organisations in conflict zones, especially in places like Sudan and Myanmar.



Invest in long-term support for women-led organisations in protracted crises, ensuring sustainability.



Bridge the divide between humanitarian aid and human rights, making the integration of both a standard practice.