

WOMEN'S HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP FUND

Lessons on power, trust and impact







Acknowledgements

This report was developed with the active participation and insights of the organizations involved in the first round of the Women's Humanitarian Leadership Fund (WHLF) developed by **Oxfam** and **Action Aid** in Ukraine:

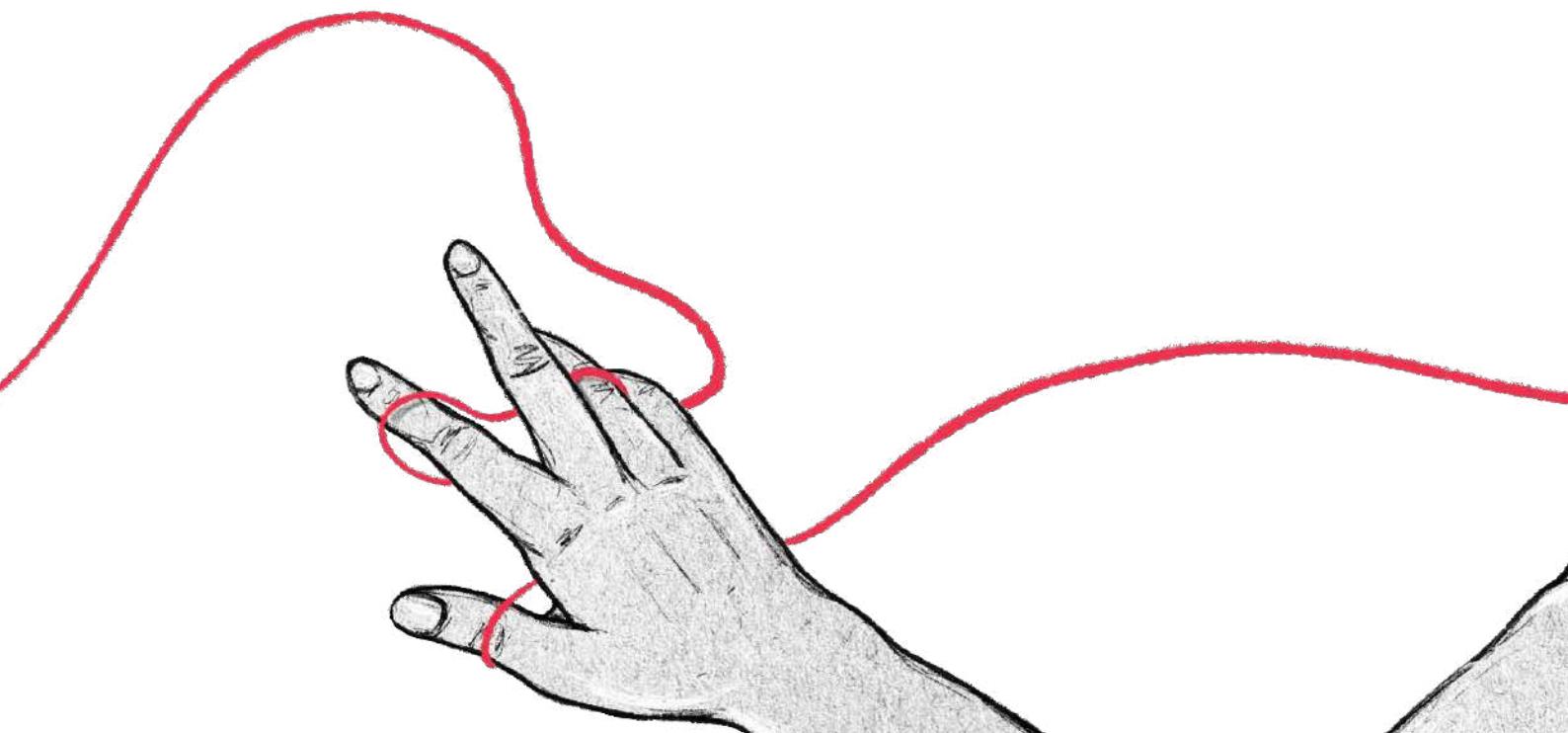
I CAN
Democracy Development Center
Fight For Right
Club Eney
Feminist Workshop
Spring of Hope. Ukraine
Green-Landiya
New Generation Kherson
Gender Stream
Women's Center 'Support, Protection, and Care'
Romani Zbora
TENET Center for Social Transformations

Their openness in sharing experiences and lessons made this collective reflection possible.

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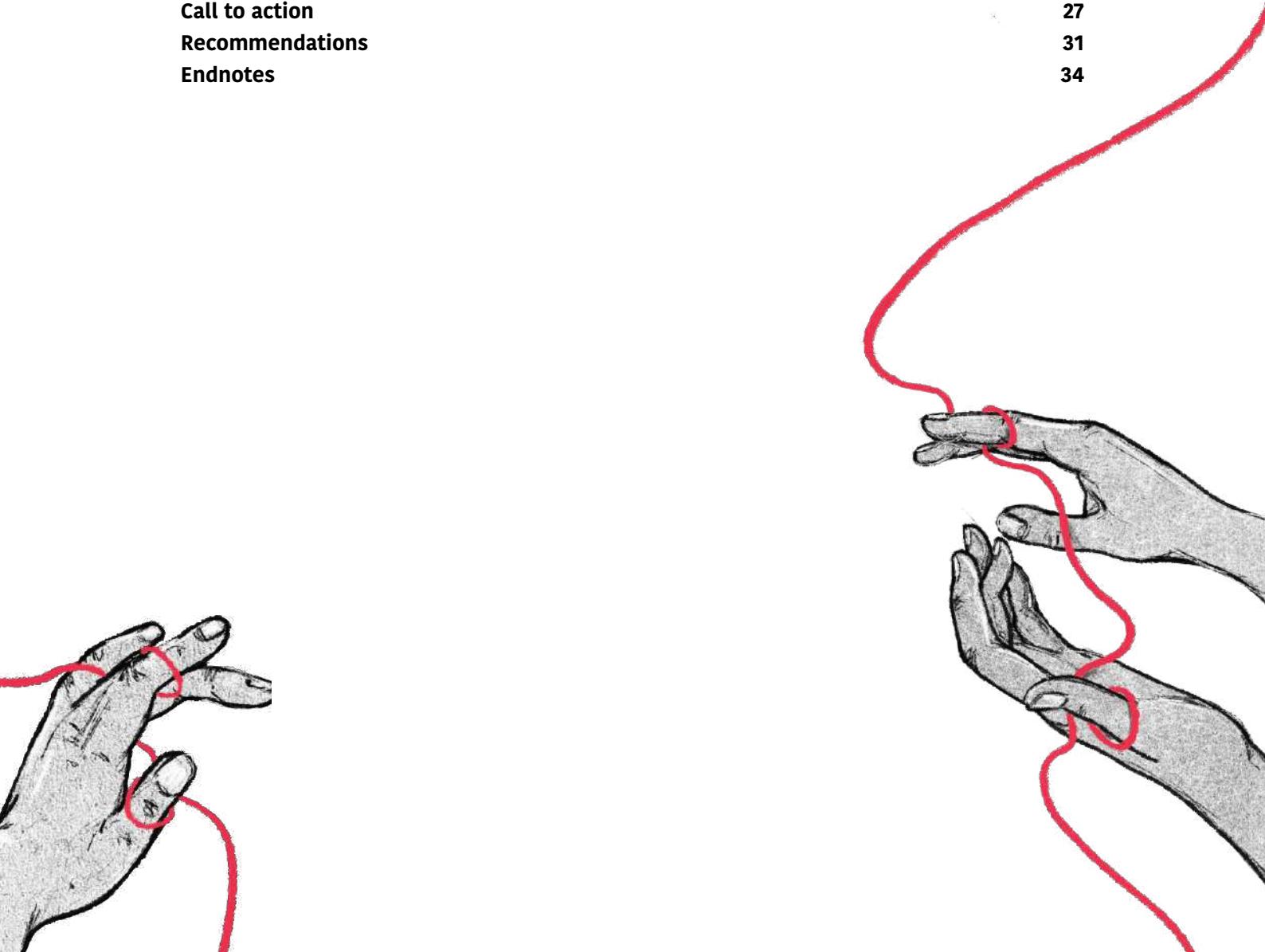
The first phase of the WHLF was made possible through funding from the Disasters Emergency Committee's Collective Initiatives Fund and Oxfam appeals funding.

You can read more about the vital work of each participating organization on the WHLF website: <https://womenleadersukraine.oxfam.org/>



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report captures our effort to turn commitments on localization and support for women's leadership into action – a learning journey that aimed to test, adapt and innovate through trust-based, flexible funding.

The Women's Humanitarian Leadership Fund (WHLF) was created to put this vision into practice. In its first phase in Ukraine, Oxfam and ActionAid together with twelve Women's Rights Organizations (WROs), tested a simple but transformative idea: trust WROs to decide how humanitarian resources are best spent to support affected communities. Through flexible, core-style funding and light, transparent processes, the WHLF gave WROs the autonomy to act quickly, adapt to shifting realities, and strengthen their organizations from within.

Piloting the WHLF was made possible through funding from the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC), as part of its commitment to advancing locally led and feminist approaches within the Ukraine humanitarian response. The concept for the fund builds on growing evidence from localization research in Ukraine – including the DEC-funded Localization Scoping Study (2023)¹ and the Humanitarian Localization Baseline (2024)² – both of which highlighted persistent barriers to equitable partnerships, decision-making power, and direct funding for local and women-led actors. These studies underscored the need for new funding models that move beyond rhetoric to tangible redistribution of power and resources – the precise gap that the WHLF was designed to address.

The results of rolling this out in practice are clear. Even small, short-term grants generated outsized impact: increasing institutional capacity, supporting staff wellbeing, and advocacy influence. Partners described the experience as “a partnership, not control” – a rare example of equitable collaboration in a sector still predominantly shaped by control-driven, non-contextualized compliance and distorted power dynamics. The pilot initiative also revealed limits: short timelines and modest scale constrained deeper, long-term change. But the lesson is unmistakable: flexible, feminist funding works.

Now is the moment to build on it. We invite donors, non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and allies to join us in scaling and sustaining such models, so that trust, not control, becomes the standard for funding women's leadership in crisis and beyond.



INTRODUCTION



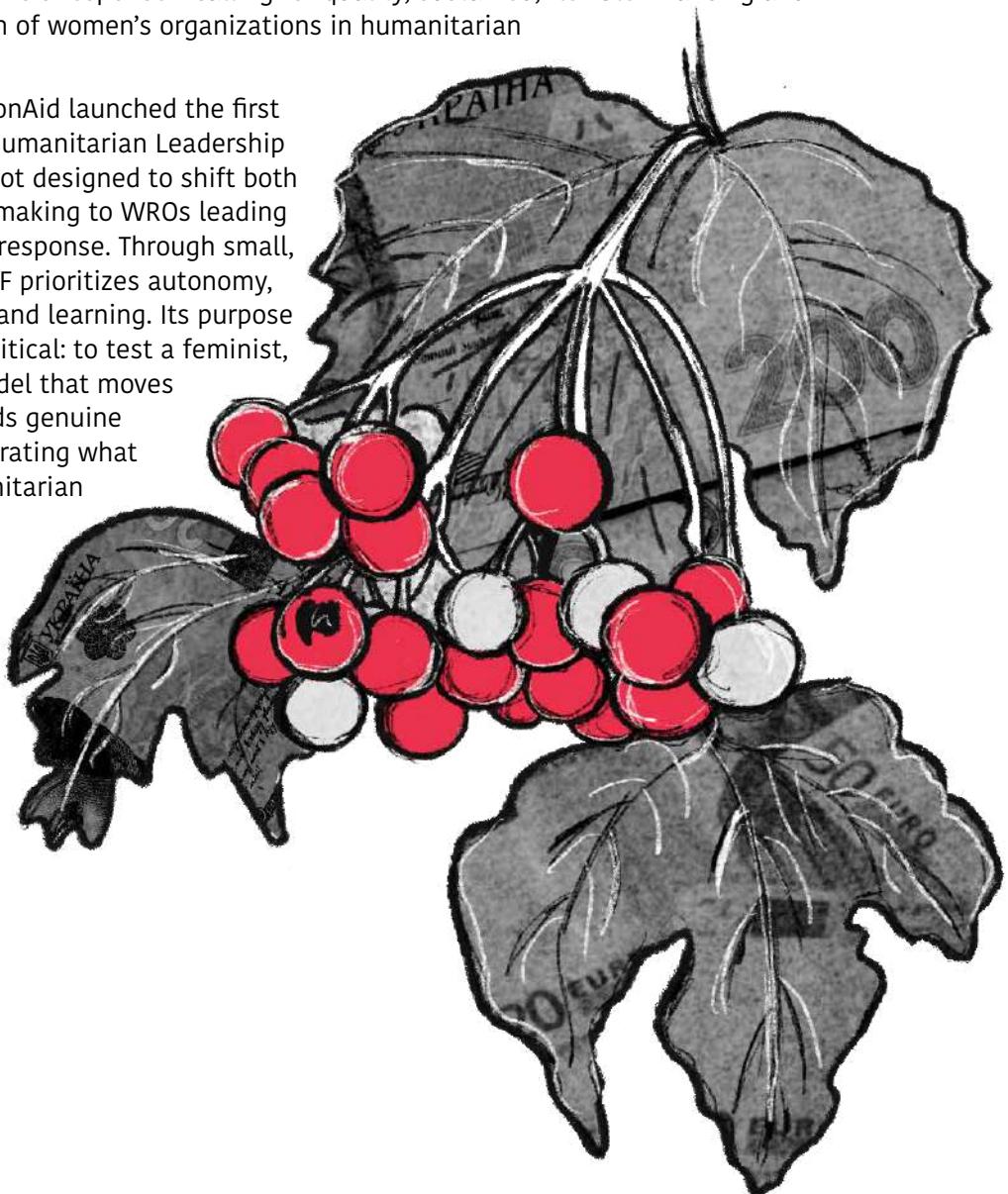
The call to localize humanitarian response has never seemed to be higher on the global agenda. Yet despite years of international commitments, enshrined in the *Grand Bargain* and ongoing humanitarian system reform efforts, local actors, particularly Women's Rights Organizations, remain at the margins of decision-making and receive only a fraction of direct funding³.

The gap between rhetoric and reality is striking, sustained by perceived rather than evidenced risk concerns, rigid compliance requirements, and a reluctance from international actors to share power and resources. The result is persistence of a system that rewards scale and bureaucracy over contextual knowledge, community trust, and feminist leadership.

The humanitarian sector continues to mirror patriarchal hierarchies: whose expertise is recognized, who is trusted to manage funds, and what defines "impact" are still shaped by structural inequalities. As global humanitarian funding tightens, WROs are often the first to face cuts, despite being critical lifelines for communities in crisis⁴. **Recognition without resourcing is meaningless.** What these organizations need is not praise but access: to sustained, flexible funding and to decision-making spaces still disproportionately occupied by international actors. Even well-established organizations often operate without the resources to sustain their work or invest in organizational capacity, staff wellbeing, institutional learning, or advocacy, leaving them vulnerable to funding shocks.

The situation for WROs in Ukraine resonates with decades of global advocacy to center women's **leadership** in crisis response – calling for quality, sustained, flexible financing and meaningful participation of women's organizations in humanitarian decision-making.

In 2025, Oxfam and ActionAid launched the first round of the Women's Humanitarian Leadership Fund (WHLF) - a joint pilot designed to shift both resources and decision-making to WROs leading Ukraine's humanitarian response. Through small, flexible grants, the WHLF prioritizes autonomy, institutional resilience, and learning. Its purpose is both practical and political: to test a feminist, locally led financing model that moves beyond tokenism towards genuine power-sharing, demonstrating what a more equitable humanitarian system could look like if commitments to localization were fully realized.



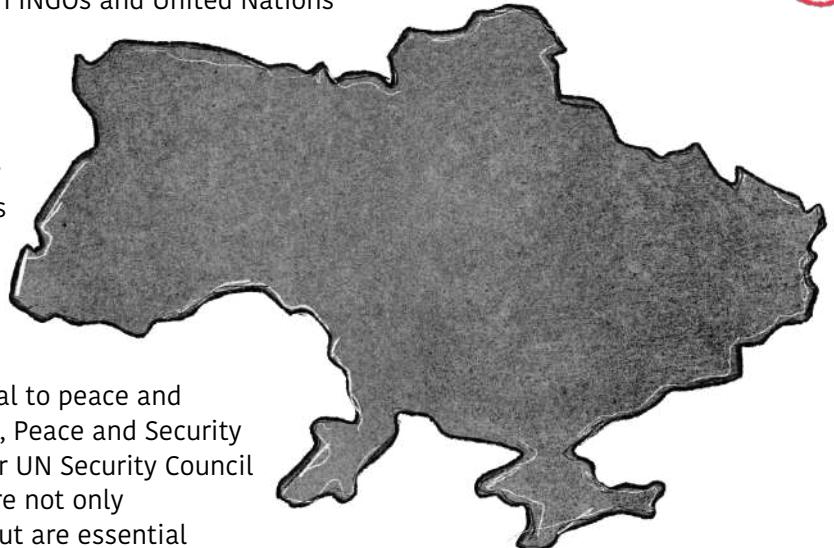
BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Since the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022, Ukraine has faced profound humanitarian and social disruption. As of February 2025, an estimated 3.7 million people remain internally displaced, 6.9 million have sought refuge abroad.⁵ Ukrainian civil society has mobilized on a massive scale. Women's Rights Organizations (WROs) have been at the forefront, coordinating evacuations, providing shelter, psychosocial and legal support, and ensuring that the needs of women, children and marginalized groups are not overlooked.

Yet despite their central role, local organizations, particularly WROs, remain severely underfunded. Less than 1% of tracked humanitarian funding to Ukraine has gone directly to local or national NGOs⁶. Most funds are channeled through international intermediaries, keeping decision-making concentrated in INGOs and United Nations agencies. Complex donor requirements, English-only documentation, and short project cycles further restrict access. For WROs, these barriers intersect with gendered inequalities that devalue their expertise and confine their contributions to "community outreach" rather than recognized leadership.

Over the past two decades, the global policy landscape has increasingly recognised women's leadership as central to peace and humanitarian effectiveness. The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, established in 2000 under UN Security Council Resolution 1325, affirmed that women are not only disproportionately affected by conflict but are essential actors in preventing violence, shaping peace processes, and leading recovery.

The more recent Women, Peace and Security and Humanitarian Action (WPS-HA) Compact has renewed this commitment, calling for sustained, flexible financing and the meaningful participation of women's organisations across humanitarian, peace and security sectors.⁷



In Ukraine, these principles have been championed through the Gender in Humanitarian Action (GiHA) Working Group, which has led research and coordination efforts to advance gender-responsive localisation. Its recent work on funding for Women's Rights Organisations confirmed that, despite their central role in the humanitarian response, most WROs remain systematically underfunded, constrained by short-term, compliance-heavy grants and limited access to decision-making spaces.⁸ These findings mirror global concerns about the chronic underfunding of women's organisations in crisis settings and underscore why feminist, flexible funding models such as the WHLF are essential to sustaining women's leadership and ensuring gender-responsive humanitarian action.

For WROs in Ukraine, chronic funding insecurity is among the most pressing challenges. Many WROs operate on short-term, project-based grants that rarely cover core costs such as staff salaries, rent, or organizational development. This leaves them in a cycle of "survival fundraising," fueling chronic stress and burnout among staff, unable to plan strategically or build institutional resilience.⁹ The freeze of US funding has deepened this fragility: **Gender Stream** saw its USAID-funded project suspended, while **Fight for Right** lost key US State Department support, leaving 40% of its 2025 operations uncovered.

A rapid assessment by the GIHA Working Group, conducted shortly after the suspension of United States funding in early 2025, found that nearly three-quarters of surveyed Women's

Rights Organizations reported major operational disruptions, and more than 60% were forced to reduce or suspend GBV programs.¹⁰ The findings highlight how abrupt donor withdrawals can undermine essential protection and recovery services and place the broader feminist movement in Ukraine at risk of contraction.

These abrupt losses forced rapid pivots and emergency fundraising, demonstrating how sudden geopolitical shifts disproportionately destabilize smaller feminist actors.

Feminist, LGBTQIA+, and Roma-led organizations also face barriers linked to their identity and mission. Donors often prioritize short-term service delivery over inclusion and systemic change, overlooking the very actors best placed to reach those most at risk. Yet these groups continue to fill critical gaps: evacuating LGBTQIA+ people, providing disability-focused case management, running shelters, and creating safe spaces. Their communities, women with disabilities, Roma women, sex workers, women experiencing addiction, internally displaced people, and queer people, face marginalization that demands peer-led, inclusive approaches rarely supported by traditional funding models.

Oxfam and ActionAid's humanitarian responses in Ukraine, grounded in feminist principles, seek to challenge this. Our aim has been to amplify the leadership of women's organizations supporting marginalized populations by challenging structural exclusion and ensuring that humanitarian assistance is rights-based and transformative rather than transactional. The WHLF was created in direct response to Ukrainian WROs' calls for flexible, feminist funding and to global movements demanding that women's leadership be resourced, not just recognized. WHLF is therefore a practical attempt to shift power and resources to WROs and demonstrate that equitable, trust-based funding is not only possible but essential for effective, locally led humanitarian action.



HOW DID
WE DO IT?

Fund delivery approach

The Women's Humanitarian Leadership Fund (WHLF) was designed based on trust. It sought to shift both resources and power by giving women's rights organizations the space to decide what stability, growth, and leadership look like in their own contexts.

The pilot phase was funded by the Disasters Emergency Committee through its Collective Initiatives program, which allows greater flexibility in terms of the activities that can be funded and the opportunity for innovation, collaboration, collective work and new partnerships. Oxfam and ActionAid jointly applied for and managed the grant, using it to test a shared model of flexible, feminist funding that could inform future localization efforts. The collaboration itself was an important part of the pilot's design – modelling partnership rather than competition and aligning both agencies' feminist approaches to humanitarian leadership.

The WHLF in Ukraine was inspired by feminist funding models globally, including the Women's Rights Fund spearheaded by Oxfam in Kenya, Lebanon, and the Occupied Palestinian Territory¹¹. The WHLF Initiative in Ukraine was adapted to a fast-moving crisis context where long-term, multi-year planning is often impossible. It aims to test how this idea can be implemented in humanitarian contexts, involving a significantly shorter timeline. The Oxfam Ukraine Response is the first Oxfam entity to pilot flexible funding in a humanitarian context and aims to learn from local partners about the value that this model can offer to enhance local humanitarian leadership globally.



The Fund's central principle was simple: **flexibility as a form of power-sharing**. By providing flexible short-term grants, WHLF aimed to address two persistent gaps in the humanitarian system, the scarcity of accessible funding for WROs and the dominance of top-down grant models that dictate priorities from above. Unlike traditional humanitarian funding, the WHLF intentionally stepped back from intervening in project design or prescribing activities. Instead, it trusted WROs to define their own priorities, with coordination and learning support provided by the **Bureau of Gender Strategies and Budgeting**. The model positioned local women's organizations not as subcontractors but as decision-makers within the humanitarian ecosystem.

Components of the process

The WHLF aims to reach a **diverse range of Ukrainian WROs** committed to gender equality in humanitarian action. In the first round, **twelve WROs** each received **€24,000 of flexible funding**, with every organisation supporting distinct communities – including gender-based violence (GBV) survivors, internally displaced persons (IDPs), sex workers, LGBTQIA+ people, and Roma women – in different regions of Ukraine. Funding was provided for a short 5-month period, with minimal restrictions beyond adherence to humanitarian principles and a “do no harm” approach. Flexibility is embedded throughout the model: WROs can allocate funds to their own priorities, shift resources between budget lines, and adjust timelines to respond to changing circumstances. Instead of asking for permission, partners simply notify Oxfam/Action Aid of changes so they can be captured for learning. This positions the WHLF as a mechanism for autonomy and trust, rather than control.

Eligibility criteria included meeting the GiHA definition of a WRO, being engaged in some level of humanitarian response, having legal registration in Ukraine, at least one year of operational experience, and a demonstrated commitment to humanitarian principles.

According to the GiHA definition, a Women's Rights Organization (WRO) is:

- 1) An organization that self-identifies as a woman's rights organization with the primary focus of advancing gender equality, women's empowerment and human rights; or
- 2) An organization that has, as part of its mission statement, the advancement of women's and girls' interests and rights (or where 'women', 'girls', 'gender' or local language equivalents are prominent in their mission statement); or
- 3) An organization that has, as part of its mission statement or objectives, to challenge and transform gender inequalities (unjust rules), unequal power relations and promoting positive social norms.

Organizations were identified through Oxfam's and ActionAid's networks and the **Bureau of Gender Strategies and Budgeting**. They were invited to submit a short “pitch” describing their leadership structure, community engagement, current funding situation, and how they would use the grant to address organizational gaps, strengthen capacity, and benefit their communities.

Pitches were assessed by a selection committee made up of Oxfam staff and a representative from a WRO with experience in the Oxfam GB Women's Rights Fund. The process was intentionally light-touch to avoid creating unnecessary barriers for smaller organizations.

Once selected, each WRO went through a partnership-based due diligence process adapted from Oxfam's CAPAS tool¹². This was not a top-down compliance check but a two-way conversation exploring "red lines" and shared commitments. Red lines included situations in which an organisation failed to demonstrate adequate safeguarding, non-discrimination, fraud-prevention measures, compliance with humanitarian principles and International Humanitarian Law, or data-protection practices. These topics were discussed openly, allowing partners to share their current practices, identify gaps, and agree on realistic steps forward. Oxfam also made commitments – to provide technical guidance, link partners to networks, and adapt tools to the Ukrainian context where needed. Unlike traditional due diligence, this approach was conversational, mutual, forward-looking, and relationship-building. The resulting agreements became living documents revisited throughout the partnership.

For ActionAid, the selection process was slightly more informal and based on a mapping exercise involving a wider pool of WROs. Following bilateral discussions, the Strategic Leadership Team shortlisted six organizations that best met the eligibility criteria and invited them to submit short "pitches," following the same format used by Oxfam. Pre-selected partners were then invited to undergo tailored and harmonized due diligence assessments. Wherever possible, the passporting process was applied to simplify due diligence for organizations that had already completed similar assessments with other UN agencies or INGOs.

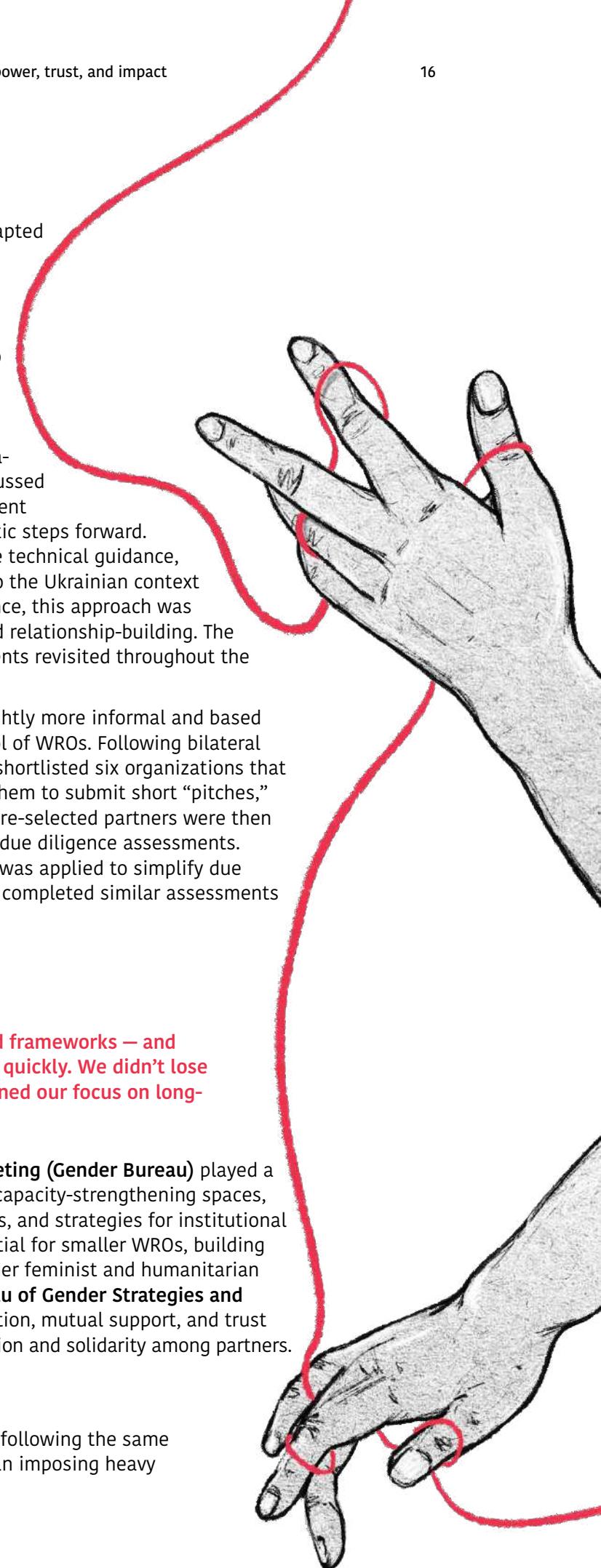
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"This funding did not constrain us with rigid frameworks – and that is exactly what enabled us to respond quickly. We didn't lose momentum; on the contrary, we strengthened our focus on long-term stability." Spring of Hope, Ukraine

The **Bureau of Gender Strategies and Budgeting (Gender Bureau)** played a pivotal role in convening peer-learning and capacity-strengthening spaces, helping partners exchange tools, experiences, and strategies for institutional growth. These learning spaces proved essential for smaller WROs, building both confidence and visibility across the wider feminist and humanitarian ecosystem in Ukraine. In addition, the **Bureau of Gender Strategies and Budgeting** fostered connection, communication, mutual support, and trust across the network, strengthening collaboration and solidarity among partners.

Reporting and accountability

The WHLF's approach to reporting was built following the same principles of trust and autonomy. Rather than imposing heavy



templates, narrative reporting focused on reflection - on what was learned, what changed internally, and how flexibility affected impact. Two optional reporting models were offered to accommodate different organizational capacities¹³. Monthly financial reports ensured transparency, but accountability was redefined as *relational* rather than purely procedural. Partner visits were used to capture learning in context, turning meetings into a mechanism for shared analysis rather than donor oversight.

In this sense, accountability was not weakened but reframed: instead of box-ticking, compliance exercises, reporting became a way to capture how WROs were strengthening resilience and organizational capacity. The purpose of reporting was not just solely to uphold donor accountability, but was deliberately framed within a broader cycle of learning and resilience-building. These reflections, together with narrative reports, provided the foundation for an end of project process focused on learning, including a joint workshop with WROs, Action Aid and Oxfam. In this way, reporting was not only a compliance tool but also a mechanism that feeds lessons back into both practice and strategy.

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“Flexibility did not create difficulties or uncertainty on the contrary, it became a tool for stability and confidence” Romani Zbora.

Partners consistently underlined that WHLF reporting requirements felt different from traditional donor approaches, as they were framed around trust and partnership rather than control. The simplified application and reporting formats were viewed as clear, supportive, and aligned with organizational needs.





IMPACT

Partners used the WHLF in ways that reflected their distinct priorities and contexts. Some invested in organizational stability — hiring specialist staff such as media and communications professionals, gender equality advisors, or archivists; securing office space; and covering core operational costs.

Others improved governance and systems by developing standard operating procedures (SOPs) commissioning audits, achieving systems management certification, or creating monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

Several prioritized staff wellbeing in response to the chronic challenges around burn out, organizing retreats, providing psychological supervision, and offering professional development in areas like strategic planning, fundraising, and gender equality. Others focused on advocacy — hosting national-level events on environmental security and women's rights, contributing to the National Women, Peace and Security Action Plan, or running campaigns on legal rights and financial independence. Many expanded their communications reach by redesigning websites, building their social media presence, and producing high-quality content to connect with donors and communities.

Strengthened organizational capacity and resilience

For many WROs, the WHLF represented more than financial relief, it provided the conditions to withstand shocks and adapt strategically. Flexible funding enabled WROs to invest in institutional stability during a period marked by donor volatility. For several organizations, WHLF grants provided the only unrestricted funding, allowing them to retain staff, cover core costs, and sustain operations while other projects were suspended or delayed. Partners highlighted that maintaining core teams was essential to preserving institutional memory and readiness for future crises.

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“The fact that we didn’t have to invent another project just to survive has been revolutionary.” GenderStream

For instance, **Fight for Right** used the grant to revise key internal policies and make its Hub more accessible for women with disabilities after U.S. funding freezes threatened their core operations. **TENET** stabilized core staff salaries, supported its media platform, and developed strategic planning tools. **Feminist Workshop** described the grant as providing “breathing space” from the constant funding race, enabling them to retain staff, conduct an audit, and test new formats for community engagement — from feminist reinterpretations of Ukrainian traditions to Pride Month activities. **Spring of Hope. Ukraine** invested in systemic improvements such as archiving procedures, policy translations, and the adoption of a self-care policy, while also initiating dialogue with government authorities on establishing a long-term Resilience Centre. **New Generation Kherson** used the grant to maintain its core team, cover essential operating costs, launch a bilingual website and pilot new educational programs, which together enhanced both credibility and strategic positioning. **The Women’s Center** focused on consolidating internal systems through policy revisions and developing a three-year strategic plan, complemented by psychosocial support for staff and new partnerships with local authorities. **I CAN** invested in a communications specialist and grant writer, resulting in a clear communications strategy, greater visibility, and stronger grant applications. Two grants were secured, and several advanced to the second stage of competitive selection. Peer-to-peer learning activities also helped refine **I CAN**’s GBV case management practices.

Gender Stream stressed that core support for staff was critical for sustaining their advocacy role and presence in decision-making spaces, particularly as international funding shrinks, and enabled them to strengthen international advocacy, including participation in G7 and global feminist forums.

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“The greatest impact on our organization was the realization that even in a time of financial uncertainty, we were able to invest in our resilience and openness to partnership.” Spring of Hope, Ukraine

Together, these examples illustrate how WHLF support was not primarily about short-term activities, but about reinforcing the institutional backbone of WROs, ensuring they could adapt, sustain their teams, and remain credible actors in the humanitarian and advocacy landscape.

Broader impact on communities and systems

The WHLF's multiplying effects extended far beyond the walls of individual organizations - it strengthened the lifelines that WROs provide to their communities every day. The Fund's purpose was not institutional growth for its own sake, but to ensure that feminist and women-led actors remained stable, resourced, and trusted enough to continue serving those most at risk. Flexible, trust-based funding allowed WROs to respond to community needs with agility and creativity, filling critical gaps that larger actors often overlook.



Club Eney used the flexibility to scale trauma-informed peer outreach and pilot survivor-support tools such as a Telegram chatbot for sex workers. They also distributed more than 1,100 aid kits and piloted trauma-informed, peer-led approaches for survivors of violence. **Feminist Workshop** engaged nearly 200 participants in Lviv through safe community spaces, experimenting with inclusive formats that combined feminist, queer, and traditional cultural practices. **Greenlandia** launched economic empowerment sessions in Kharkiv region, supporting women to explore self-employment and leadership opportunities despite displacement and chronic stress. **Gender Stream** sustained legal assistance and monitoring of hate crimes, ensuring LGBTQI+ communities had continued access to protection mechanisms while also amplifying their voices in international advocacy platforms.

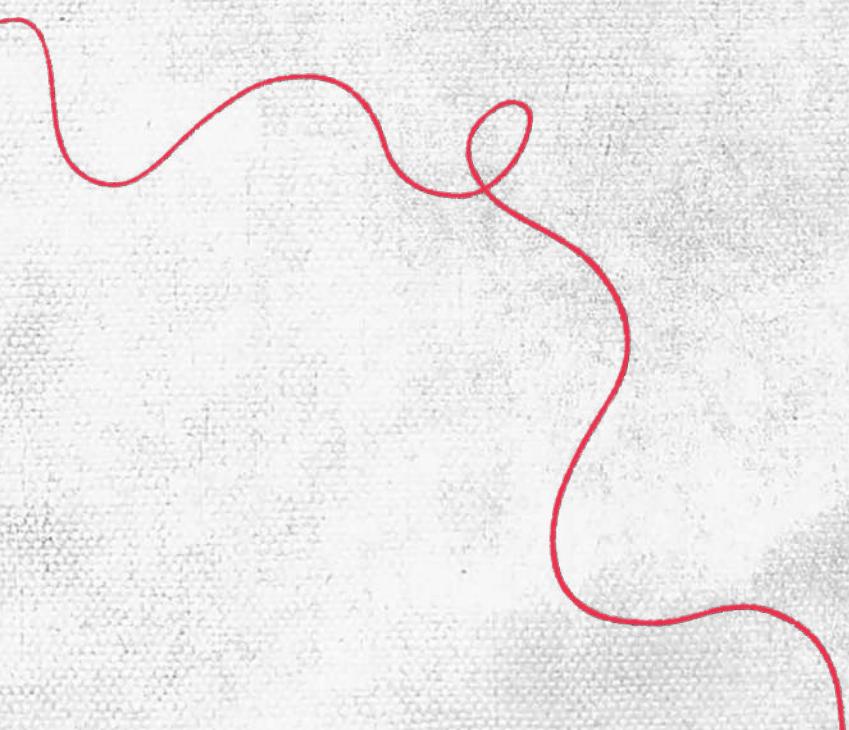
Beyond direct service delivery, the WHLF strengthened WROs' positions within humanitarian coordination and policy spaces. **Gender Stream** expanded its advocacy on LGBTQIA+ inclusion at international forums, including the G7 and global feminist networks. **Greenlandia** successfully integrated gender and social inclusion tools into regional employment centers, advancing women's leadership in recovery processes. **TENET** broadened Roma women's participation in advocacy platforms, building alliances that amplified historically marginalized voices.

Romani Zbora channeled the flexibility of the grant into strengthening risk management and communications. **Democracy Development Center** leveraged the funding to advance its advocacy agenda, successfully linking gender and environmental justice at the national policy level, and gaining formal cooperation from two ministries.

These examples illustrate that when feminist organizations are resourced and trusted to lead, humanitarian response becomes more inclusive, effective, and accountable to those most affected. WROs can continue their leadership in driving systemic change and challenging the hierarchies that have long governed the sector. The WHLF's value lies not only in strengthening organizations, but in safeguarding the community networks they sustain – ensuring that women's leadership continues to anchor crisis response, resilience, and recovery.



REFLECTIONS AND CHALLENGES



Long-term impact and learning require time and continuity

While partners consistently described the approach as transformative, they also identified structural and operational challenges that need to be addressed for the model to achieve deeper and more sustainable change.

A recurring theme across partner reflections was the short project duration. Six-month grants provided critical breathing space, yet were insufficient to consolidate institutional reforms or advance systemic advocacy. **Feminist Workshop** noted the difficulty of developing long-term strategies within such compressed cycles. Many organizations expressed that **multi-year, predictable funding** would be essential to stabilize teams, reduce burnout, and move from reactive to strategic planning. The short-term structure also limited opportunities for cross-learning and collaboration among WROs, as most networking took place only toward the project's end.

Many WROs emphasized that the true results of the WHLF are long-term and may not yet be visible. Investments in systems, policies, and leadership development will generate impacts beyond the current reporting period. However, the short timeframe makes it difficult to capture this trajectory. This insight reinforces the need for **learning-oriented monitoring frameworks** that trace institutional and relational outcomes over time rather than focusing solely on short-term outputs.

Many of the fund's most significant outcomes – improved systems, leadership growth, and inter-organizational trust – will unfold beyond the immediate reporting period. This points to the need for longer cycles, follow-up grants, and ongoing learning reviews. Building continuity would allow partners to consolidate gains and document deeper institutional transformation over time.

Flexibility must be operationalized, not assumed

Although all partners valued WHLF's flexibility, some found it challenging to interpret in practice. **I CAN** reported initial uncertainty about how far financial reallocations could go and which types of changes would be acceptable. Others highlighted that while programmatic flexibility was strong, financial reporting requirements remained relatively traditional.

This points to a broader learning: flexibility cannot simply be declared; it must be operationalized through clear guidance and ongoing dialogue. Building mutual understanding of flexibility, what it looks like, where its limits lie, is critical to scaling the model.

The pilot demonstrated also that flexibility is transformative only when it is consistently practiced across the funding cycle. Partners valued WHLF's open communication and adaptive approach but called for even clearer guidance on what flexibility means in operational terms. This includes transparent processes for reallocations, adaptive timelines, and simplified financial procedures.

Staff wellbeing and organizational capacity are essential for sustainability

A key insight from WHLF partners is that **institutional resilience depends on human resilience**. Several partners raised the issue of chronic fatigue and emotional exhaustion. The continuous crisis environment, combined with insecure funding and expanding responsibilities, left many teams stretched beyond capacity. Although some organizations used WHLF resources to introduce staff care policies or retreats, partners underlined that these measures remain temporary solutions to a systemic problem: the humanitarian sector's dependence on overextended, under-resourced local actors. Future funding rounds could include specific, flexible lines for staff care, rest, and collective reflection. Such support is not an optional add-on but a necessary condition for sustaining women's leadership in protracted crises.

Competition versus collaboration

Another insight concerned the fragmented donor landscape in Ukraine. Short-term, project-based funding has inadvertently fueled competition among WROs, undermining opportunities for coalition-building and joint advocacy. Partners suggested that sustained, coordinated support across donors could foster greater solidarity and reduce the pressure to compete for limited, small-scale grants.

In this context, the convening role of the **Bureau of Gender Strategies and Budgeting** was repeatedly emphasized as essential. Peer exchanges and reflection sessions helped transform competition into collaboration, demonstrating the potential of feminist convening spaces to nurture collective resilience. Networking and collective learning were among the most valued aspects of the initiative. WROs emphasized the power of shared spaces to exchange strategies, reflect on challenges, and build alliances. Many requested that these be institutionalized rather than ad hoc, with regular feminist learning circles, peer mentorship, and cross-organizational capacity sessions facilitated throughout the funding cycle.

The **Bureau of Gender Strategies and Budgeting**'s role was pivotal here, demonstrating how national feminist actors can serve as conveners and ecosystem builders. Future iterations should formalize this function, allocating dedicated funding for peer learning and sector-wide coordination.



Reframing risk

The WHLF also prompted reflection on what constitutes “risk.” The process showed that due-diligence can be streamlined and accountability can coexist with feminist values - if INGOs are willing to accept uncertainty and prioritize relationships over control.

Across partners, the initiative revealed that effective risk management is often relational rather than procedural. Open communication, clarity at onboarding, and consistent dialogue proved more effective in managing delivery risks than layers of documentation. Partners consistently met their financial and programmatic commitments, demonstrating that trust-based funding does not weaken accountability; it redefines it as a shared responsibility rooted in mutual purpose.

The experience also challenged assumptions about which actors are “high-risk.” Many WROs, in particular long-established WROs, demonstrated robust financial systems, transparent governance, and adaptive planning – reallocating funds or adjusting timelines responsibly when circumstances changed. Flexibility, rather than introducing uncertainty, often reduced operational risk by allowing timely course correction and responsive decision-making.

At the same time, partners highlighted that bureaucracy and rigid compliance create their own risks: burnout and exhaustion, administrative burden, and the exclusion of smaller organizations unable to navigate complex donor requirements.

Ultimately, the WHLF showed that risk in humanitarian partnerships must be understood not only in financial terms, but as equally human, relational, and systemic. The real risks lie not in flexibility, but in the ongoing underfunding and marginalization of women’s rights actors closest to affected communities. A feminist approach to risk therefore requires redistributing risk ownership: recognizing that WROs already manage complex contextual and operational risks daily, and that donor flexibility can, in fact, reduce exposure for all parties by strengthening responsiveness, continuity, and trust.

Reflections on shifting power and partnerships

Partners described the WHLF as an unusually equal collaboration with international actors, but they also highlighted that true localization requires structural changes beyond individual initiatives. The experience exposed how much of the humanitarian system still depends on INGO gatekeeping: donors fund international partners, who then sub-grant to local ones, effectively reproducing hierarchies even within well-intentioned programs.

One of the fund’s clearest successes was the partnership between **Oxfam and ActionAid**. Shared values and complementary strengths created a model of collaboration rather than competition, a rare example in a humanitarian system still driven by institutional branding and donor visibility. This in turn reinforced trust among local partners, who viewed the initiative as grounded in genuine solidarity rather than organizational self-interest.

The WHLF also showed that flexibility can work within diversity: Oxfam and ActionAid were able to operationalize the fund in ways that aligned with their own systems and procedures, without losing sight of their shared goal – providing flexible, feminist funding that strengthens the role and leadership of WROs. **This ability to accommodate different ways of working under a common strategic vision is key to making the model scalable and replicable across the wider humanitarian system.**

The process prompted reflection among both Oxfam and ActionAid on what it means to **relinquish control**—to move from managing risk to redistributing it, from compliance to mutual accountability.

The experience showed that INGOs can collaborate effectively when they prioritize purpose over profile. Joint implementation also reduced duplication, streamlined learning, and signaled to donors that feminist partnerships are possible across international agencies. This kind of collaboration is increasingly vital in a humanitarian landscape defined by shrinking funding, the humanitarian reset, and evolving expectations of international actors to work as enablers rather than intermediaries.

Building on this collaboration, Oxfam and ActionAid have since secured funding through the Disaster Emergency Committee's Middle East Appeal to replicate the WHLF model in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, signaling both the strength of their partnership and the model's adaptability to other crisis settings.

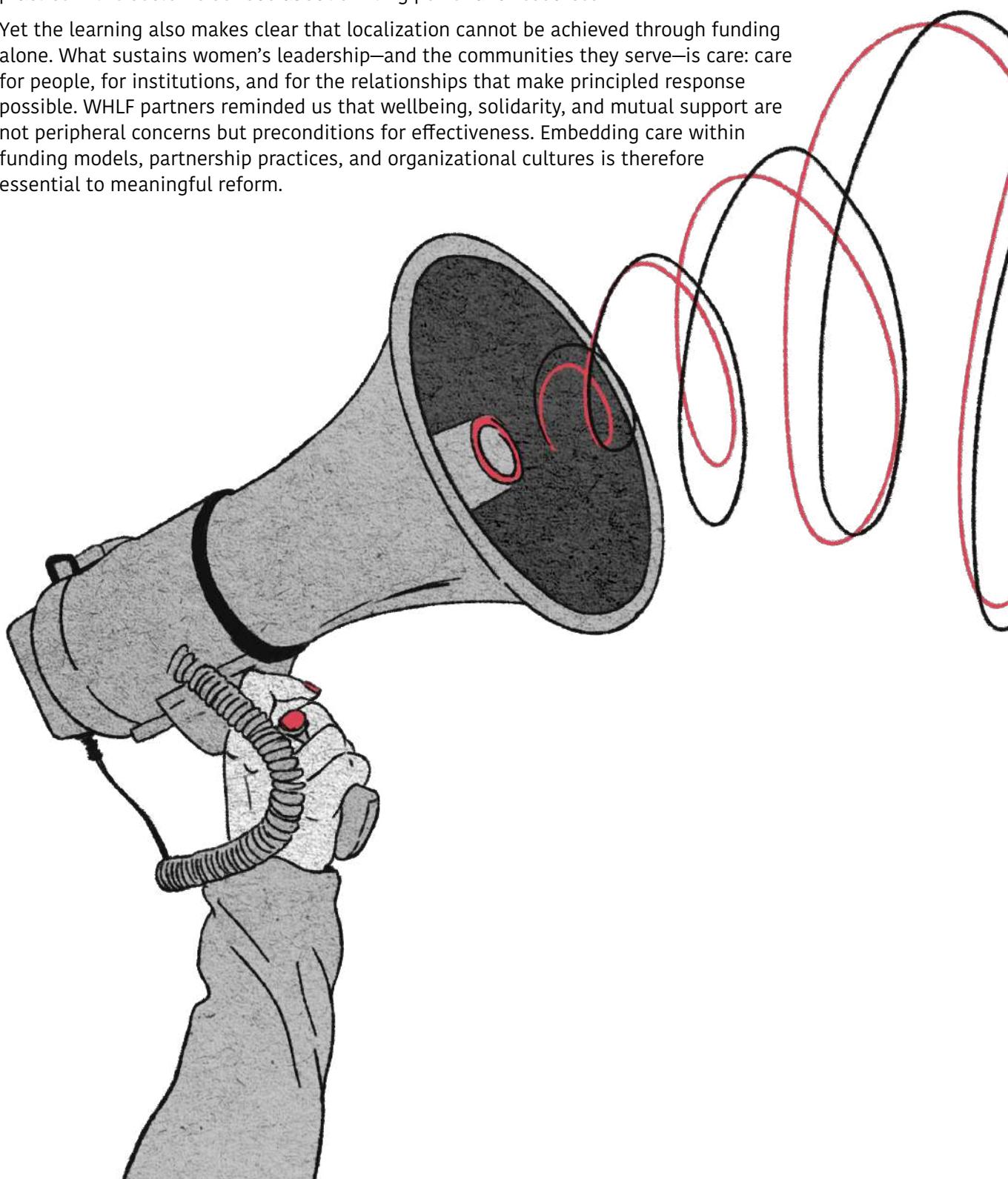


CALL TO ACTION

The Women's Humanitarian Leadership Fund has demonstrated that flexible, trust-based funding is not only a gender intervention but a core driver of humanitarian system reform. By prioritizing local ownership, institutional resilience, and feminist leadership, the WHLF directly advances the localization commitments made under the Grand Bargain and the wider agenda for a more effective, people-centered humanitarian system.

This approach shows that streamlined and localized systems are both possible and impactful: simplified applications, reflective reporting formats, and direct recognition of WROs' expertise stand in stark contrast to traditional top-down donor practices. The lessons from WHLF highlight that such mechanisms are not an exception but should become standard practice if the sector is serious about shifting power and resources.

Yet the learning also makes clear that localization cannot be achieved through funding alone. What sustains women's leadership—and the communities they serve—is care: care for people, for institutions, and for the relationships that make principled response possible. WHLF partners reminded us that wellbeing, solidarity, and mutual support are not peripheral concerns but preconditions for effectiveness. Embedding care within funding models, partnership practices, and organizational cultures is therefore essential to meaningful reform.





The WHLF reminds us that in times of humanitarian crisis, protecting the space for women's rights and feminist leadership is itself a humanitarian imperative.

The goal is not only to deliver aid more equitably, but to ensure that the advocates of equality – those who challenge exclusion, violence and discrimination – can continue their work when it is most at risk and actively shape humanitarian responses.

It is a model of humanitarian transformation; proof that small, flexible grants to local actors can catalyze resilience, strengthen networks, and amplify advocacy at national and international levels. Positioned within the collective shift towards localization, the WHLF complements other feminist funding mechanisms and networks, reinforcing that capacity strengthening, staff wellbeing, and horizontal collaboration are as vital as direct service delivery.

For localization to become reality, donors and INGOs must invest beyond pilots and integrate feminist principles into humanitarian reform efforts: multi-year, core, and accessible funding; context-adapted and proportionate due diligence; and equitable participation in coordination structures. **Systemic change means recognizing that care, trust, and shared risk are not luxuries — they are the foundation of effective, inclusive humanitarian action. The real test of localization lies not in individual grants but in whether systems of risk, accountability, and recognition are redesigned to value local expertise and sustain the people and movements that make equality and recovery possible.**

RECOMMEND- ATIONS



To Donors and International Non-governmental Organizations

- Provide multi-year, core, and flexible funding to Women's Rights Organizations, recognizing that stability and institutional care are prerequisites for effective humanitarian response.
- Maintain a clear "indirect costs" line in budgets and ensure resources for duty of care, enabling WROs to support staff and community welfare and organizational resilience.
- Streamline compliance requirements and implement proportionate due diligence processes to reduce administrative burdens on smaller organizations.
- Invest in local feminist intermediaries – that can manage and redistribute resources equitably within local ecosystems.
- Redefine "risk" to include the cost of inaction, burnout, and exclusion; recognize that overregulation and underfunding of local actors are themselves major risks to effectiveness and accountability.
- Relinquish control, share resources, and accept accountability for power. INGOs must move from managing localization to enabling it, shifting from implementers to conveners and allies.
- Institutionalize feminist partnership practices – including co-creation of priorities, participatory due diligence, and mutual learning frameworks.
- Model inter-INGO collaboration, to align resources and reduce duplication rather than competing for visibility.
- Reframe accountability integrating qualitative and trust-based mechanisms alongside financial compliance.

To Women's Rights Organizations

- Continue building collective power through joint advocacy, shared learning, and coalition-building across regions and sectors.
- Prioritize self- and staff-care, embedding wellbeing and safeguarding policies that sustain feminist leadership and the communities supported.
- Document and communicate impact using feminist evidence approaches, highlighting qualitative change and community influence.
- Participate actively in shared learning spaces and best-practice exchanges, including leveraging learnings from the WHLF, ensuring WRO perspectives shape sector standards as well as project outcomes.

To United Nations Agencies

- Ensure meaningful participation of WROs in coordination mechanisms, not as observers but as decision-makers shaping priorities, funding strategies, and accountability frameworks. Ensure resources are available to fund this leadership to prevent the strain of unpaid responsibilities.
- Integrate feminist localization metrics into system-wide monitoring, linking funding flows to women's leadership and influence in response planning.
- Replicate and resource feminist funding models, positioning them as central to humanitarian reform, recognizing care and equality as measures of effectiveness.

АКТОРІЙМ

WORLDS UNKNOWN

UNIVERSITY LIBRARY
DOUGLASS

1. Погас до будинку КОХНОВ
2. Чесність
3. Збереження власно: ДАШИНСОВ
4. Краще до будинку, а не
ПОЛІЦІЯ

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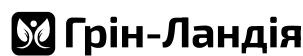
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- Одніка речисів \rightarrow
- Висока кіфінот / РОКЕ \rightarrow
- Одніка змісі підсніти \rightarrow ОНОВИТЬ ЗМІСІТ
- ПІДСНОВКА / ПІДСНОВНІ ЗМІСІТ \rightarrow
- ОДНІАКА СИНДАМІТ ПІДСНОВКА \rightarrow ПІДСНОВНІ ЗМІСІТ
- ПІДСНОВНА ПРОДАГІСТ \rightarrow ПІДСНОВНІ ПАМ'ЯТІВ
- ПРОДАГІСТ / ПАВЛІК ПОДІЛІСТ \rightarrow
- МОД.ПОДІЛІСТ / ОУНІКА ПОДІЛІСТ \rightarrow
- МАСІСІУРАННА \rightarrow
- ВІНОВНА БІСІДА / ПІДСІНІСТ \rightarrow





Endnotes

- 1 NGO Resource Centre, ICVA, Humanitarian Advisory Group, Info Sapiens (2023). *A Humanitarian Localization Baseline for Ukraine*. <https://ngocoordination.org/en/library/humanitarian-localization-baseline-ukraine>
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- 10 Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group Ukraine (2025). *Impact of United States Funding Suspension on Ukrainian Women's Organizations*. Rapid Assessment. UN Women. <https://ukraine.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2025/03/impact-of-united-states-funding-suspension-on-ukrainian-womens-organizations>
- 11 The WRF provides flexible funding to grassroots organizations empowering them to invest in their own organizational priorities. For more information, see: <https://www.oxfam.org.uk/oxfam-in-action/women-equality/womens-rights-fund/womens-rights-fund-partners/>
- 12 CAPAS: Collaborative and Adaptive Partnership Approach, a common approach to partnership across Oxfam that aims to shift Oxfam's current top-down one-size-fits-all, heavily compliance and risk-oriented assessment and management of a partner organization to a collaborative, more power-aware and adaptable partnership assessment and management style that balances risk and opportunity and centers mutual accountability.
- 13 Narrative reporting was structured around interim (mid-term) and final stages. These narratives can take two forms (written or conversation based) allowing WROs to share progress in ways that best fit their capacities.



GENDER
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БЮРО
гендерних стратегій
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This report was developed with the active participation and insights of the organizations involved in the first phase of the Women's Humanitarian Leadership Fund, developed by Oxfam and Action Aid in Ukraine. We acknowledge colleagues who contributed to documenting the learnings, analysis, and review.

This report is part of a series of learning activities that Oxfam's Ukraine response has committed to in order to inform internal approaches to humanitarian responses and to influence for wider humanitarian system reform. For further information on the issues raised in this paper, please email advocacy@oxfaminternational.org or ukraine@actionaid.org

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