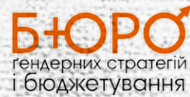


POWER TO LEAD



**A Shared Call to Action from
Women's Rights Organizations
in the occupied Palestinian
territory and Ukraine**

The partners



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INTRODUCTION

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This Call to Action emerges from a joint learning exchange that brought together Women's Rights Organizations (WROs) from the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) and Ukraine. The crises they are responding to are rooted in distinct histories and political realities, but the exchange also revealed important commonalities in the structural barriers WROs face within the humanitarian system.

In both oPt and Ukraine, partners recognized something urgent in each other's experiences: WROs are not peripheral to humanitarian response, but essential to it. They are reaching women, girls and marginalized groups who are often unreached by other parts of the system, while sustaining protection, care, advocacy and community trust under extreme pressure.

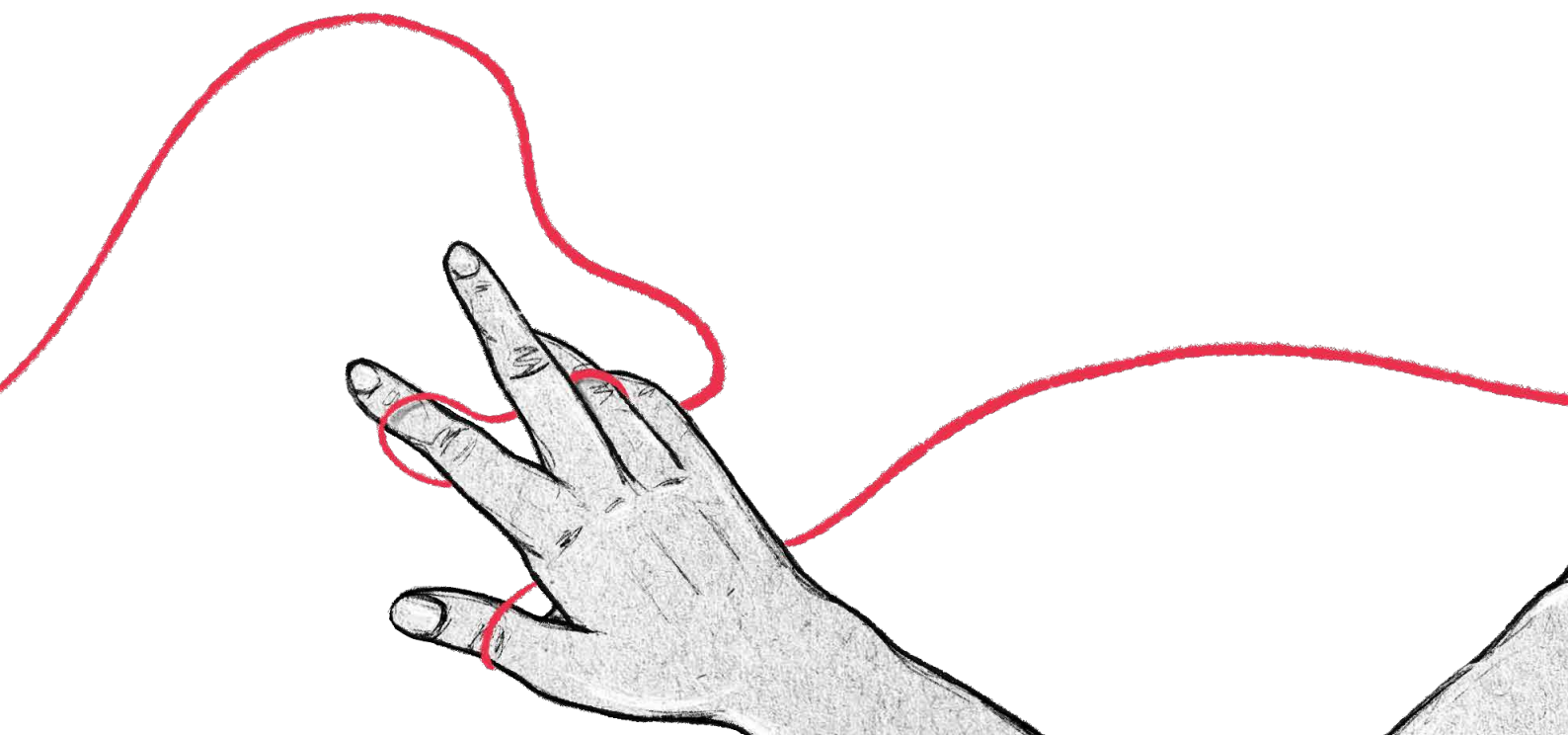
But WROs do not *only* deliver humanitarian response. They protect rights, support women's empowerment, strengthen social cohesion, and sustain the long-term resilience of communities. Supporting WROs is therefore not only an investment in emergency response. It is an investment in recovery, protection, and the future of communities affected by crisis.

The exchange created space for WROs to recognize shared challenges, learn from one another's strategies, and name the changes they want to see from donors, international NGOs, and humanitarian actors.

Across both contexts, WROs described forced displacement, insecurity, damaged infrastructure, restrictions on movement, loss of livelihoods, rising gender-based violence, early and child marriage, electricity outages, and the exhaustion of sustaining support without stability. Displacement is prolonged and recurrent, with restrictions on return and recovery. This further compounds humanitarian needs and places additional pressure on women, girls and WROs that continue to provide assistance under these conditions.

However, the barriers described by WRO participants are not only caused by conflict and forced displacement. They also result from an international humanitarian system that too often relies on WROs' access, knowledge and community trust without recognizing them as equal partners or resourcing them in ways that allow them to lead.

WROs in oPt and Ukraine are already showing what feminist humanitarian leadership looks like in practice. The question is not whether they have the expertise, access or legitimacy to lead, but whether donors, international NGOs and humanitarian actors are willing to change their systems so that WROs are trusted, resourced and treated as equal partners.





CALL TO ACTION 1

Call to Action 1: Fund WROs directly, flexibly and long-term

For Palestinian and Ukrainian WROs operating within active conflict zones, flexible core funding is not a luxury, it is a necessity. It is the only way to respond to the realities, rights and dignity of the women and communities they serve. Too often, the funding available to WROs is too short-term, too restrictive, and routed through too many intermediaries.

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“Flexible funding means the ability to respond to reality, which is always more complex than any plan” WRO in Ukraine

For WROs, flexibility is not simply a grant modality or a more convenient way of managing budgets; it is a form of power-sharing. It means trusting WROs to decide how humanitarian resources are best spent, based on the realities they are facing and the priorities women and communities are naming.

WROs are challenging deeply rooted structural inequalities, responding to rapidly changing needs, and sustaining long-term care within their communities. Short project cycles and narrow, pre-defined activities do not match the reality of this work, and the cost of this mismatch is evident.

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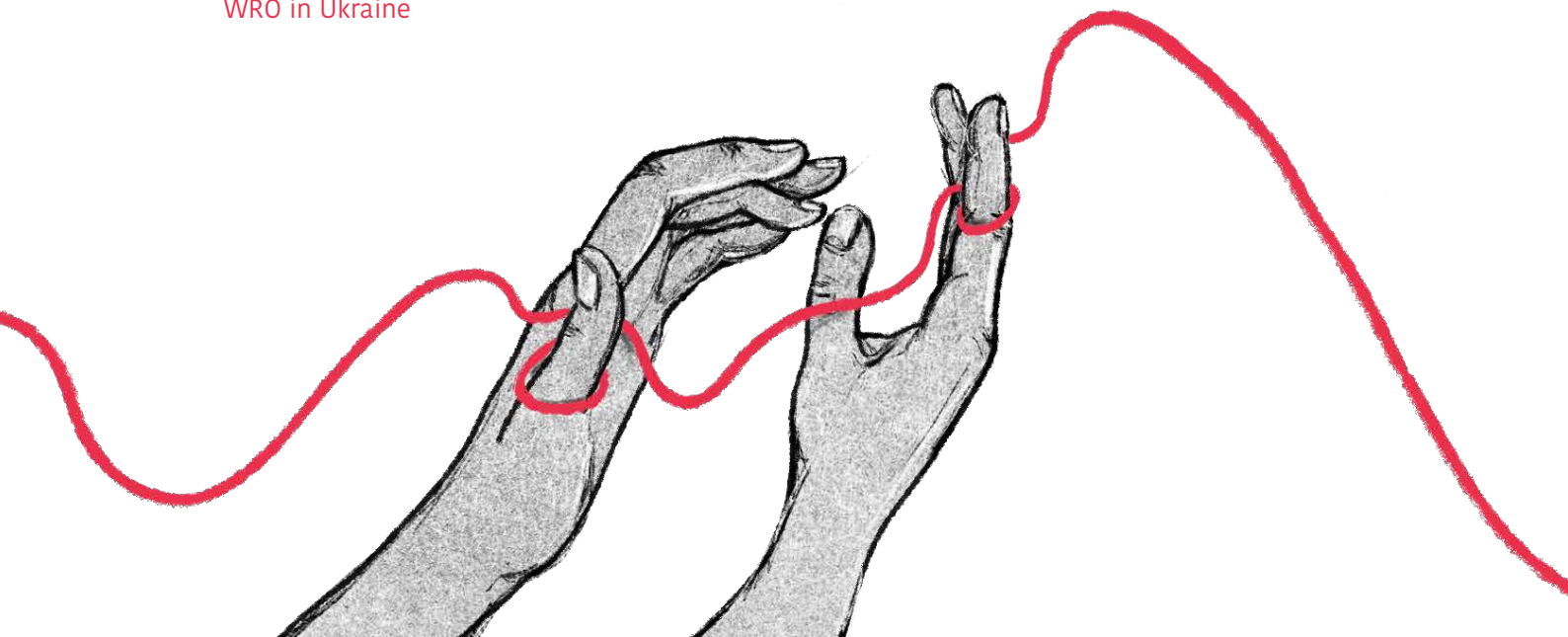
“We are not able to respond promptly to certain emergencies... primarily they are short term projects where we need to meet certain targets for a short period of time, and we are not confident that funding will continue.” WRO in Ukraine

The consequence is that WROs are expected to sustain teams, services and community trust between grants, without the stable funding needed to make that possible.

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“We are not confident that we can support our team in between projects and not able to plan for the long-term. This leads to burnout and is very draining, and it is very difficult to operate, to continue advocacy, and raise awareness of issues.”

WRO in Ukraine



These barriers, created in large part by international systems that fail to resource WROs for the work they do, compound the pressures and risks of operating under extreme danger, in war, and other contexts of extreme violence or unrest, further undermining their capacity to respond. Short-term funding does not simply constrain WROs' impact; it actively erodes organizational stability and then treats the resulting fragility as evidence that WROs lack capacity.



“Flexible funding should be the basis for all projects, and this will enhance partnerships and will better serve the communities, WROs and CBOs (Community Based Organizations).” WRO in occupied Palestinian territory

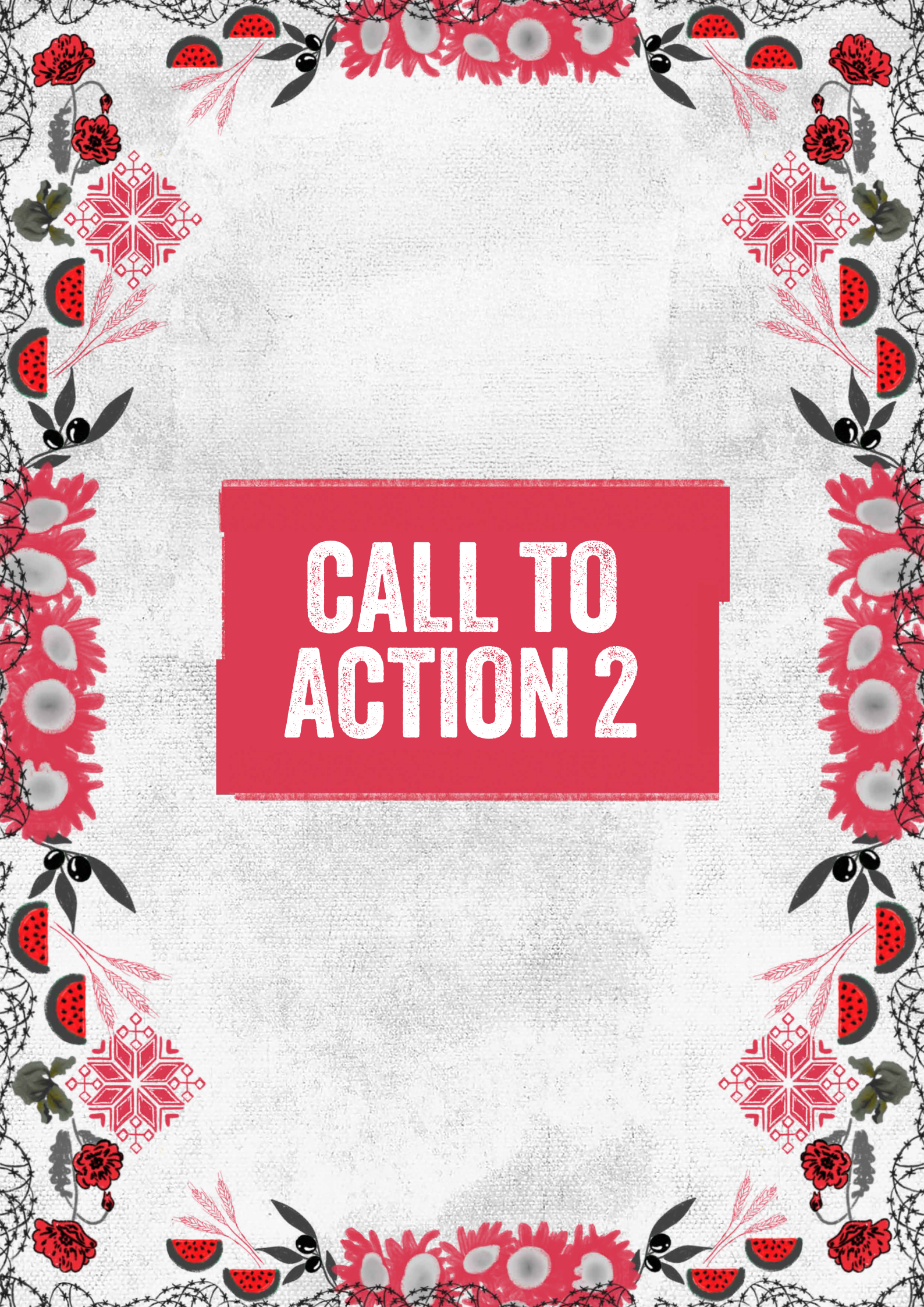
“Flexible funding made it easier to work with women so they can decide how to support themselves.” WRO in occupied Palestinian territory

“This is what distinguishes flexible funding, not only about recipients, but also about supporting the capacities of WROs.” WRO in occupied Palestinian territory

Trust-based, flexible support transforms what WROs can do. It allows WROs to respond quickly, care deeply and support their communities in ways that are holistic, adaptive and based on their own priorities, and the results are concrete.

Immediate action required

- Provide direct, long-term, trust-based funding that covers core and indirect costs.
- Scale flexible, feminist funding approaches on terms WROs help to define.
- Route funding to WROs and CBOs directly wherever possible, reducing unnecessary intermediary layers.
- Build flexibility into budgets, timelines, reporting requirements, and activities so WROs can respond to changing needs, risks and opportunities as they arise.



CALL TO ACTION 2

Call to Action 2: Treat WROs as leaders and partners, not contractors

Despite years of commitments by international donors, UN agencies and INGOs to advance localization and equitable partnerships, the relationship between international actors and WROs in Ukraine and oPt remains one characterized by delivery, not partnership. Too often, WROs are treated as contractors, consulted for their knowledge, or “used” for their access, rather than entrusted with decision-making power and long-term investment. WROs are expected to deliver pre-defined projects, report and absorb disproportionate compliance demands, but have little influence over program design, funding decisions, or coordination. The consequences of these top-down approaches are rarely measured for their true impact, yet they shape whose priorities count, whose knowledge is valued, and who holds decision-making power.



“We hear a lot about localization from international organizations, but we just perform a program that is proposed to us. We are just [treated as] contractors, we have very little influence over these programs.” WRO in Ukraine

“Our experience with international organizations was traumatic for us, morally and emotionally, because of very hard deadlines, delayed funding and difficult conditions of cooperation.”

WRO in Ukraine

“As CBOs, we have our own way of supporting women, but funders mostly have their own strategy and agenda that we have to follow.” WRO in occupied Palestinian territory

The close proximity and relationships WROs have with affected communities are frequently valued for the access they provide, rather than recognized as a source of leadership and legitimacy. This exclusion frequently extends beyond funding and operational arrangements. In many cases, WROs are not merely sidelined within decision-making spaces, but denied access to them altogether, rendered invisible in the very processes that shape the responses affecting their communities. This is not true partnership. It undermines WROs' leadership, keeps decision-making in the hands of actors who are not embedded within affected communities, and causes a moral incoherence within the humanitarian system.



“We are the ones in danger. We are the ones working on the ground, and we know the needs of people. We should be considered as main partners, not only as implementers on the ground.” WRO in occupied Palestinian territory

“We are the closest to communities, to displaced women, to people in need. Our role is not secondary; we are essential, and partnerships should be directly with us.”

WRO in occupied Palestinian territory

When power is genuinely shared, humanitarian response looks different. WROs shape the priorities, the funding decisions, and the pathway through which support reaches women and communities.



“In some regions there are a lot of IDPs and practically no financing. They have no homes, they have no jobs, and MHPSS (Mental Health and Psychosocial Support) is in great demand, but we cannot help them because the geographical distribution of funding also affects the humanitarian situation.” WRO in Ukraine

“Flexible funding makes partners be real partners, plan interventions based on emergency situations that are faced and the decision making is based on consultation, flexibility and quick response.” WRO in occupied Palestinian territory

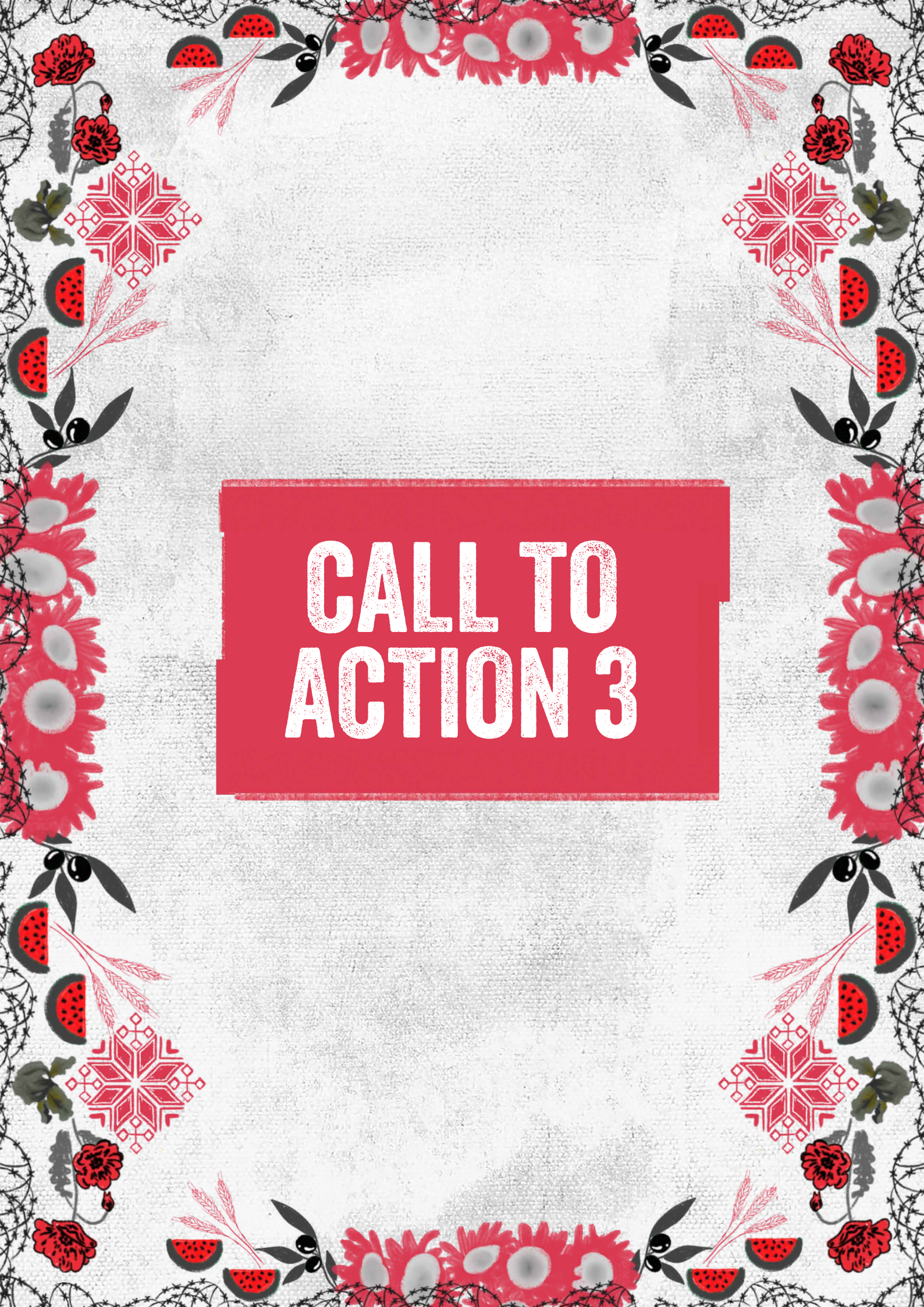
When WROs hold real influence over how and where humanitarian resources are allocated, funding follows genuine need rather than the existing footprint of international actors. Meaningful partnership is not defined purely by consultation, but also by whether WROs' judgement and inputs can influence decisions and whether power is redistributed in practice.



“Cooperation can be different. We are heard, our opinion is important [and] is taken into account.” WRO in Ukraine

Immediate action required

- Take steps to guarantee WROs a place in the coordination and decision-making spaces where priorities and funding are decided. Resource and fund this work.
- Meaningfully engage WROs in program governance, co-design, and evaluation from the outset.
- Build genuinely equal partnerships that are built on trust, dialogue, and shared values.
- Reposition INGOs as enablers rather than gatekeepers and intermediaries.



CALL TO ACTION 3

Call to Action 3: Simplify access, compliance and language requirements

Many Palestinian and Ukrainian WROs are caught in a vicious cycle. Donors and international partners require proof of previous funding, scale, robust systems, English-language documentation and compliance capacity before providing support. Yet without flexible funding, core funding for overheads, or established and equitable partnerships, WROs cannot build the very systems being demanded of them. They are asked to prove capacity before they are resourced to strengthen it.

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“We helped people and responded to real needs using our own resources. Despite our daily work, we were not taken seriously. It felt like a vicious cycle: to receive funding, you need experience; and to gain experience, you need funding.”

WRO in Ukraine

The result is predictable. The same larger international and national organizations are funded first, cycle after cycle. Smaller and grassroots WROs remain locked out, even when they are closest to the communities donors want to reach. This traps WROs in a system that limits their ability to grow, sustain their work, and deliver the greatest impact for women and communities.

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“Applying for funding is a tedious process, [with] big requirements and unnecessary conditions, especially for small grants. The complexities of the process don't match the budget, which makes little sense... When funding opportunities do arise, which is rare, especially for new CBOs, we are overlooked. It's as though we don't exist.”

WRO in occupied Palestinian territory

The requirements that reproduce this dynamic are presented as neutral safeguards, but they function as a filter that selects for organizations shaped by the donor system over those rooted in the community, with English-language requirements as a prime example.

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“We have to write in English, write proposals in English and present our ideas in English... If you don't know English, it is difficult to get funding.”

WRO in occupied Palestinian territory

Rigid compliance requirements also have a direct operational cost. When reporting, procurement and accounting processes are disproportionate or inflexible, they pull WROs away from community support and towards administrative work that is often unfunded and unrecognized.

“The conditions are quite rigid and quite harsh to access funding. This keeps us from focusing on the most valuable part of our operations: supporting women in very dire circumstances. Instead of serving them and focusing on their basic needs, we constantly have to settle administrative issues.”

WRO in Ukraine

Experiences of international organizations such as Oxfam and ActionAid have challenged the misconceptions around risk and risk management with WROs through programs such as the Women's Humanitarian Leadership Fund (WHLF). This experience has demonstrated that relationship-based approaches to risk management or simplified and proportionate compliance processes do not inherently increase risk. The conflation of proportionate compliance with recklessness is not an evidence-based position; it is a habit that keeps resources circulating among the already-resourced.

Immediate action required

- Accept reporting and proposals in national languages.
- Apply proportionate, risk-tiered due diligence.
- Fund and support compliance processes in parallel with project implementation, rather than treating these as unfunded obligations.
- Hold clear kick-off conversations that set mutual expectations from the start.
- Review compliance processes to ensure WROs are not excluded by default.





CALL TO ACTION 4

Call to Action 4: Fund the full cost of safe, sustainable humanitarian work

Palestinian and Ukrainian WROs are delivering immediate humanitarian response and responding to a crisis that they are also living through. They are operating in some of the world's most dangerous and intense settings, often while their own teams, communities, and families are directly affected by the ongoing insecurities.

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“The destruction, the demolition of our offices, the loss of equipment in addition to the shortage of communication and electricity... There's the constant aggression on our lives and our mobility... What we do now is we survive. We focus on survival mode.” WRO in occupied Palestinian territory

“I have not left our country since the start of the invasion. It is really difficult to work under the pressure, under the threat of shelling and other dangers. We face problems on a daily basis.”

WRO in Ukraine

Despite this, costs incurred for safety, security, and staff wellbeing are often treated as ‘overheads’ or additional expenses as opposed to fundamental support for those to respond effectively in humanitarian contexts. This pressure is intensified by the multiple roles women leaders and staff carry, sustaining humanitarian work while also holding family, care and community responsibilities. Women's leadership cannot be sustained by exhausting women leaders.

Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) is central to this. WROs play a crucial role in delivering gender-responsive harm reduction services together with health, psychosocial and protection support, particularly during conflict. WROs are supporting women and girls living with trauma, forced displacement, violence and loss, while their own staff and volunteers are exposed to the same crisis conditions. Psychosocial support is not an optional service or a staff benefit, it is part of what makes humanitarian response safe, ethical and sustainable.

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“We have a lot of burnout... civic activists are also women, wives, mothers, sisters. They carry out multiple functions... Therefore, there is a lot of emotional burnout.” WRO in Ukraine

“Many of us live in tents in very difficult conditions.”

WRO in occupied Palestinian territory

When safety, security and duty of care are underfunded, the cost is transferred onto the WROs themselves; and the resulting exhaustion is then seen as inefficiency or low capacity. Undervaluing these essential needs can erode the sustainability of any response, and places organizations and teams at greater risk of harm and burnout.



“We’re very close to the front line... our teams cannot be fully confident of their safety and security. We do not have appropriate safety equipment.” WRO in Ukraine

This is not only a question of risk exposure. It is also a question of resources. WROs are expected to keep operating safely in dangerous conditions, while absorbing the time, planning, equipment and internal capacity this requires.

This includes the administrative and indirect costs that keep organizations functioning between projects. Management teams, finance staff, proposal development, coordination and core systems are often invisible in project budgets, but they are what allow WROs to sustain services when one grant ends and before another begins. Without these costs covered, continuity is undermined. Teams are lost. Support to communities is interrupted. The work becomes harder to restart each funding cycle.

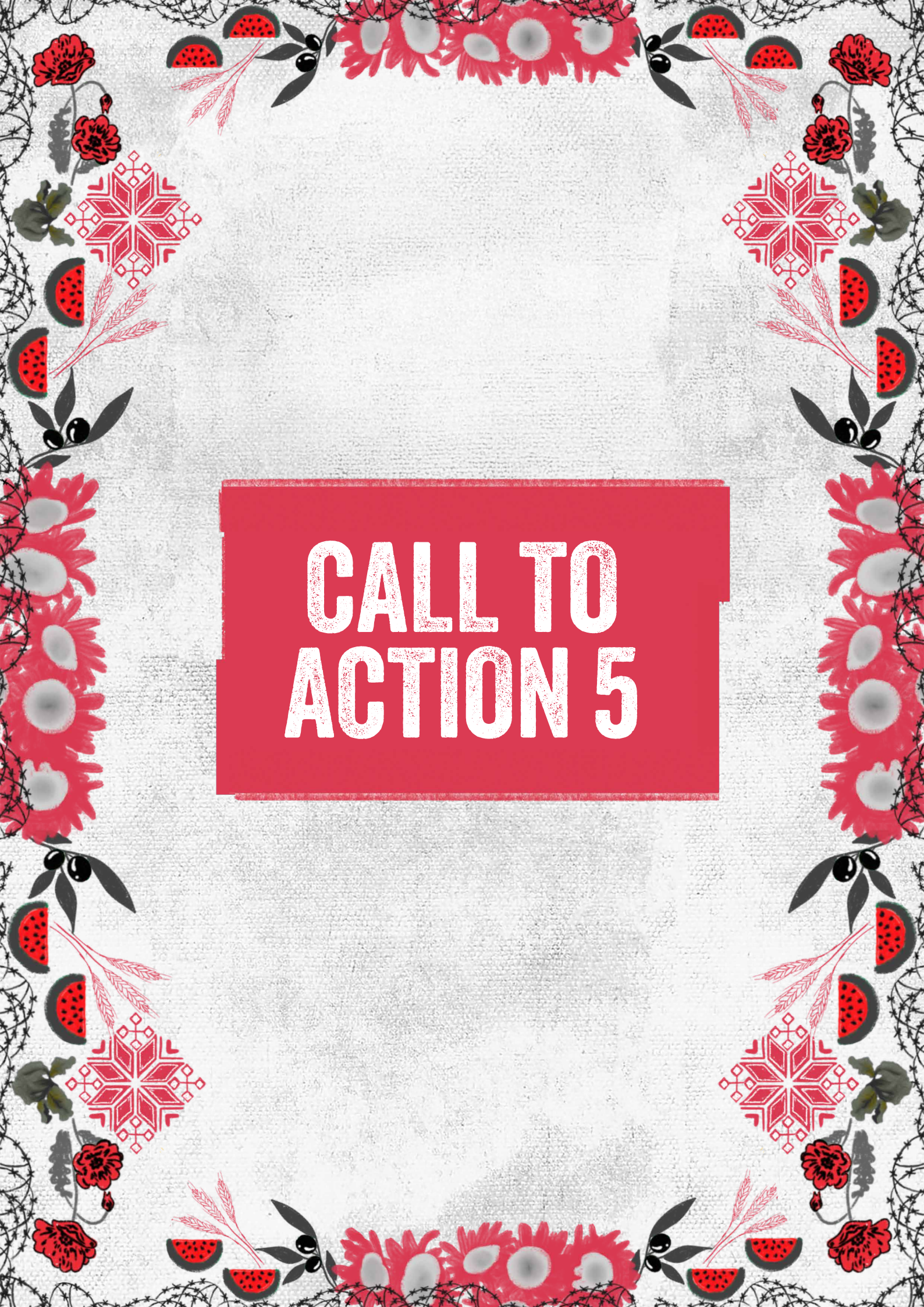


“We operate under dangerous conditions... direct threat to life and health of our team and our beneficiaries... this takes a lot of internal resources.” WRO in Ukraine

Funding the full cost of the work, including the cost of protecting those delivering the work, should not be categorized as an additional expense, but as a condition of locally led humanitarian effectiveness. The organization, its people and its resilience need to be treated as part of the response and not separate from it.

Immediate action required

- Fund duty of care in every grant and at every level, including staff wellbeing, physical and digital security, and psychosocial support.
- Include dedicated provision for personal safety, recognizing that staff working in high-risk areas may also face protection risks beyond the workplace.
- Permit flexible budget reallocations to meet urgent operational needs as they arise.
- Recognize care, safety, and organizational resilience as components of humanitarian effectiveness rather than departures from it.
- Cover administrative and indirect costs so WROs can sustain teams and services between project cycles.
- Respect the critical role that WROs play in delivering safe, effective and accountable humanitarian response.



CALL TO ACTION 5

Call to Action 5: Invest in collective power, solidarity and feminist learning

Short-term, competitive funding isolates WROs. It pushes organizations into competition for limited resources and leaves little space for collaboration, alignment, or collective actions.

This has a cost. Knowledge, experience, and partnerships are lost between funding cycles. WROs are forced to put new project requirements first, instead of building on what has already been achieved collectively.

Competition over scarce funding can also distort organizational priorities. When WROs' survival depends on chasing donor agendas, they are pressured to reshape their work around what is fundable. The first thing at risk is the independence that makes WROs valuable.



“We have to change our scope of work in order to get the funding, and this changes our mandate.”

WRO in occupied Palestinian territory

The exchange between WROs in oPt and Ukraine showcased another possibility. Across both contexts, participants highlighted the value of solidarity, peer-learning, mentorship, and spaces for connection. These spaces are not secondary. They are part of how WROs build power, share solutions, and strengthen collective influence.



“Networking and communication between organizations are of utmost importance. During these sessions, we learned about each other’s experiences... We forged bridges, we found like-minded people, and we managed to start some joint initiatives. We realized that we are not alone.” WRO in Ukraine

The recognition that WROs across both contexts face the same system, and can learn from one another's strategies, is exactly the kind of connection that competitive funding suppresses. Donors and international actors should intentionally invest in spaces for peer learning, exchange and collective action, rather than treating them as optional extras.



“The similarities between our contexts made us want to learn more from each other’s experiences, including innovative methods and solutions that could be useful in our own contexts.” WRO in occupied Palestinian territory

There is also a structural dimension that donors and international actors can change directly. Localization commitments often weaken as funding moves through the humanitarian chain. WROs, CBOs and frontline responders remain last in line for direct, long-term, and flexible funding, even when they are first to respond.



“Flexible funding is very important, but it should not be short-term. We need long-term funding in order to better serve our people.” WRO in occupied Palestinian territory

Immediate action required

- Invest in feminist convening spaces, mentorship, coalitions, peer-learning, and collective advocacy. These spaces allow WROs to collaborate, influence humanitarian systems, and enter decision-making spaces with shared agendas and collective power.
- Fund organizations to build on what they have already achieved. WROs should not be forced to restart, redesign and repackage their work every project cycle to match shifting donor priorities.
- Implement localization and humanitarian reset commitments through the full chain of humanitarian actors. Funding and partnership opportunities must reach WROs, CBOs and grassroots responders directly, not only international or larger national intermediaries.
- Move beyond localization rhetoric. International actors and donors should work together to increase WRO access to all funding opportunities, including pooled funds and cascading mechanisms that redistribute resources, power and decision making to the organizations closest to affected communities.
- Establish accountability frameworks and monitor the implementation of localization commitments to ensure they are translated into concrete practices rather than remaining merely declaratory.



ACT NOW

Act Now

The choice is straightforward: keep funding around WROs or start funding with them.

WROs in oPt and Ukraine are already demonstrating what feminist humanitarian leadership looks like. Trusted by their communities, present where others cannot reach, sustaining care under conditions most of the system never has to face.

What they are asking for is simple: trust, resources, safety and a real share of power, on terms they help set. The expertise, access, and legitimacy are already there. What is missing is the willingness of donors and international actors to transform their own systems, priorities, and habits to match.

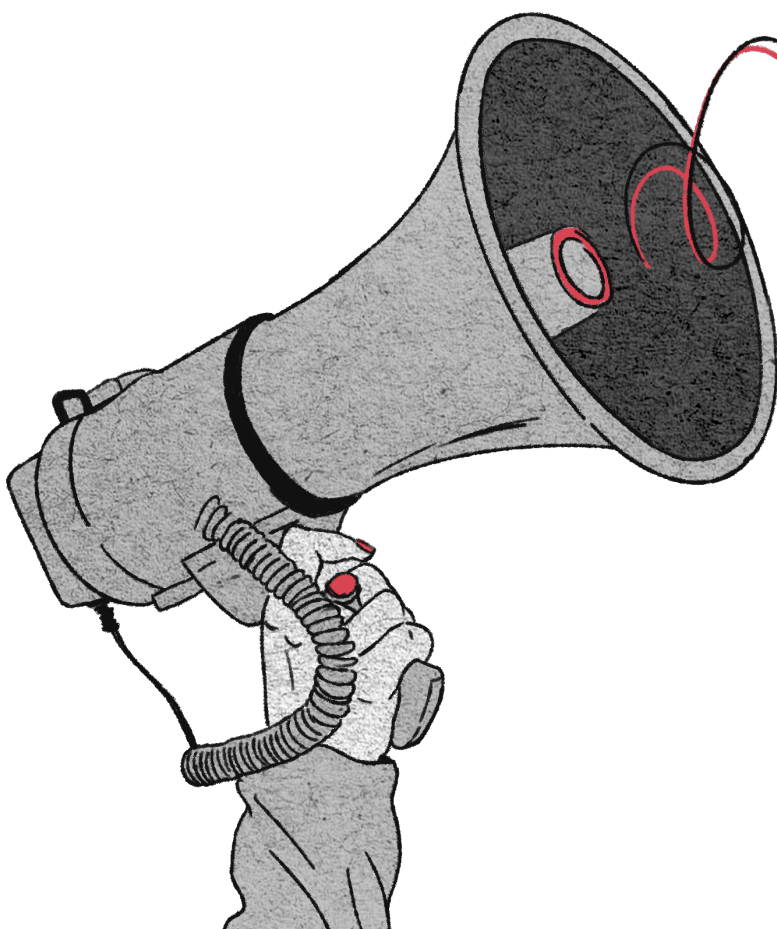
That willingness has to be demonstrated by the international intermediaries closest to this work, and WROs are explicit about what they expect of them.



“ActionAid and Oxfam can help us relay this idea to other funders: that WROs should be approached directly. This would give them the floor to play a bigger role, help beneficiaries raise their voices, receive better services, and see the impact of these services, especially for women.”

WRO in occupied Palestinian territory

The burden of proof should no longer sit with WROs. They have already shown what they can and are doing. The question is whether the system, and the INGOs positioned within it, will use their power to open doors rather than guard them.



Participating organizations

This Call to Action was shaped by the contributions of WROs, WLOs and CBOs from the occupied Palestinian territory and Ukraine.

Participating organizations from the oPt included:

- Al-Najd Development Forum
- Palestinian Women Development Society
- Qusra Feminist Association
- The Women's Not to Forget Organization
- Union of Cooperative Association for Saving and Credit
- Women in the Eastern Neighbourhood Women's Centre Association
- Women's Affairs Technical Committee
- Women Program Centre – Al Maghazi

Participating organizations from Ukraine included:

- The Bureau of Gender Strategy and Budgeting (Gender Bureau)
- Charitable Foundation “I CAN”
- F1
- Feminist Workshop
- Fight For Right
- Gender Stream
- Green-Landia
- Hromadskyi Tsentr «Nova Heneratsiia” (New Generation Kherson)
- Open Society: Institute of Local Democracy
- Spring of Hope
- Tenet

About the work behind this Call to Action

Oxfam and ActionAid have worked in partnership to invest in flexible, feminist funding approaches that support Women's Rights Organizations and Women-Led Organizations working in humanitarian crises. This work has also drawn on learning from [Oxfam's Women's Rights Fund](#) approach, adapting its principles to the realities of different humanitarian contexts. This commitment has been put into practice through distinct but connected programs: WISE in the occupied Palestinian territory and the Women's Humanitarian Leadership Fund in Ukraine. Both programs have received support from the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC), alongside other sources of funding. These initiatives combine flexible resources with organizational strengthening, peer learning, and spaces for collective reflection.

Rather than asking organizations to fit narrow, pre-defined project models, this approach supports WROs and WLOs to identify their own priorities and use funding in ways that respond to their realities, from sustaining services and retaining staff, to strengthening internal systems, investing in safety and wellbeing, building advocacy, supporting communities and maintaining the organizational foundations that make longer-term humanitarian response possible. Learning from the first phase of the Women's Humanitarian Leadership Fund in Ukraine is captured in [Women's Humanitarian Leadership Fund: Lessons on Power, Trust and Impact](#). For Oxfam and ActionAid, this is a practical investment in feminist humanitarian leadership: supporting WROs and WLOs not only as responders, but as organizations with the knowledge, legitimacy and leadership needed to shape humanitarian response and recovery.

This shared approach also created the space for Palestinian and Ukrainian WROs to come together, share experience, reflect on common barriers in the humanitarian system, and jointly develop this Call to Action.

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This report was developed with the active participation and insights of the organizations involved in the Women's Humanitarian Leadership Fund in Ukraine, and WISE in occupied Palestinian territory, developed by Oxfam and ActionAid.

For further information on the issues raised in this paper, please email advocacy@oxfaminternational.org or ukraine@actionaid.org

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