**[Humanitarian women](https://www.dawn.com/news/1819497/humanitarian-women)**

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ON March 8, 2024, the world will commemorate International Women’s Day as it does every year. This year, perhaps much more than other years, the day falls in the midst of a global crisis. The war in Gaza has had an inordinately harsh impact on women, who together with the children make up two-thirds of the population and thus two-thirds of the casualties. It is very possible that the [famine](https://www.dawn.com/news/1817089) conditions and disease outbreak are killing many more women than they are men.

Even in all this, there is hopeful change. One of the more heartening facts that has come to the fore in this world full of crisis is that women are increasingly making up more and more of the population of humanitarian workers. Even though they are underrepresented in the leadership ranks of most humanitarian organisations, they now make up 40 per cent of the humanitarian workforce.

The ability of these women to take humanitarian action means that communities themselves (to which the women often belong) are able to participate in crisis response and action. This also means that more women can be reached by humanitarian organisations, because in some countries male humanitarian workers do not have access to crisis-affected women at all.

Most of these humanitarian women are part of local or grassroots organisations, and thus are able to provide rapid crisis assessment by evaluating needs and communicating them to supply and distribution points. It is the success of humanitarian women from grassroots organisations that led leaders in the development industry to realise that the key to women’s empowerment lies in promoting these grassroots and community-level organisations.

If there is one feminist quality that is worth celebrating this International Women’s Day it is resilience.

In 2016, at the World Humanitarian Summit, a statement called the ‘Grand Bargain’ was released, which indicated that NGOs providing aid must now develop programmes and frameworks that involved NGOs and even smaller community-led organisations if they were to be effective. This has been particularly emphasised in the case of preventing gender-based violence and other forms of aggression against women which respond best to gender-responsive programming.

These ideas make sense even within the Pakistani context. Among the attempts that have been made to reduce violence against women, the laws, the hotlines, etc, it is those closest to the situation on the ground that have the best chance. If crimes like karo-kari are to be reduced, it is the buy-in of the communities themselves that is required. Ultimately, an end to the sort of practice that treats women like toys and property can only be reduced if women, including mothers and grandmothers, can band together and protect the younger women.

Similarly, when crises such as the catastrophic floods of a couple of years ago occur, it is these informal groups of women that can serve as a bulwark against early marriages and the trafficking in women that occurs during periods of economic and social hardship.

The grit and resilience of women and their humanitarian organisations can even be seen in Gaza where the genocide has reduced the population to the most meagre kind of survival. An organisation that is one of the few operating in Gaza has started an initiative called ‘From Woman to Woman’ where they are mobilising young women to work in the displacement camps and make attempts to try and provide women with their hygiene and sanitary needs.

One female worker explained just how terrible the situation was when a pregnant woman stopped drinking water because the toilets in the camps were so unhygienic; she became sick and had to be rushed to hospital. Everyone has heard how women in the maternity wards are undergoing C-sections without anaesthesia. Women like the aforementioned worker are the ones who are trying to make conditions better even with the meagre resources they are given.

Muslim countries share similar conservative cultural values. People in these states are often wary of formal institutions such as courts to resolve disputes or address sexual violence. Efforts to eliminate gender-based violence here have met with obstacles as top-down laws and programmes do not include communities as stakeholders and thus end up producing only temporary change at best. Grassroots organisations, in this context, especially those with women workers, can make a difference

Ironically, the Covid-19 pandemic provided women working in community-based organisations the ability to build networks and provide leadership in a crisis. When the pandemic crisis began, the leaders and international staff of many NGOs left. Money for women’s projects was slashed and diverted to Covid projects. However, women still needed healthcare, food and medicine.

Once again it was women workers who came to the assistance of other women by organising informal networks through WhatsApp groups. They also continued awareness and information exchange sessions on Zoom so that women would not become isolated and would still have the ability to connect with other women in times of extreme stress.

If there is one feminist quality that is worth celebrating this International Women’s Day it is resilience. The women of Gaza, the women in Pakistan have all endured hardship in one form or another. We are the keepers of each other’s secrets, the suppliers of each other’s strength and sisterhood. We come from centuries of women who have displayed enormous stores of strength, borne hardships so that their daughters and granddaughters can have better lives. I am the product of many women’s sacrifices as are all the women who will read this article.

International Women’s Day this year should be a year of gratitude for the sacrifices made by all the women who have nurtured and supported us, from mothers and sisters to friends and teachers. Things are not well with the world, but at least half of the world’s population realises that the solutions lie not in more violence, more death, more mayhem, and more male egos. It is women who are our strength, salve, and solace in these terrible times.

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