Applying WILPF’s Holistic Feminist Resourcing Approach in Syria
The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region continues to face varying levels of political instability, cross-border insecurities, and failure of the rule of law. Many of these challenges are a result of authoritarian regimes and occupations, conflicts that emerged in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, and more recently, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Under these circumstances, women – who stand at the frontlines of the movement for peace, justice, and human rights – are encountering multifaceted barriers to meaningful participation in conflict prevention, resolution, and post-conflict transition.

One significant barrier relates to insufficient and inconsistent funding policies common to donor-led funding practices. As a result, not-for-profit and civil society organisations with feminist agendas have been forced to neglect their long-term feminist goals in favour of short-term projects that fall in line with donor requirements and priorities – limiting their impact and threatening their sustainability.

For unregistered and/or grassroots groups, these challenges are heightened even further. Because of their registration status or perceived risks about their capacity and ability to manage grants, these organisations and groups often fall completely outside the radar of donors – making access to funding incredibly difficult.

Seeking to find an alternative to these traditional and ineffective top-down approaches, WILPF developed the Holistic Feminist Resourcing Approach. Through a combination of flexible funding, tailored technical support, and a range of networking and coordination opportunities, the approach aims to support organisations with feminist values and agendas to work towards their visions, while acknowledging their complex realities and diverse needs.

Implemented for the first time through the Feminist Movement for Change in Syria project, which launched in 2018, “holistic feminist resourcing” embraces a participatory approach which assigns high value to partners’ needs; goes against the conditionality, bureaucracy, and inflexibility of a large number of donors’ policies; and refrains from imposing a pre-determined agenda on partner organisations that might ignore their needs and realities on the ground.

Through a combination of flexible funding, tailored technical support, and a range of networking and coordination opportunities, WILPF aims to better equip partner organisations with the resources they need to pursue their feminist agendas and to reduce the constant pressure on fundraising to secure core funds for their sustainability. This approach allows partners to focus on strategic, sustainable, and long-term planning and to make progress towards realising their feminist visions.
FEMINIST LENS AND APPROACH
Incorporating WILPF’s integrated feminist intersectional analysis of the root causes of conflict and resourcing feminist movements.

PARTNER CENTRED
Acknowledging local feminist expertise and leadership, and facilitating open, safe, and feminist spaces to and for partners.

PRINCIPLES

PARTNER LED
The process should be led by partners; their “needs” should not be identified for them.

ACCOMMODATING AND CONTEXTUAL
The theoretical and academic are connected to practical and implementable material; partners’ feedback and needs are accommodated.

PARTICIPATION
We take a participatory approach to delivering funding and support that is responsive to needs and priorities, and provides grantees the space to decide on priorities and approaches.

FLEXIBILITY
Partners are free to propose activities that best fit their priorities. Changes in the political context or the rise of new opportunities are considered during the implementation and can result in amendments to the original action plan, budget, etc.

TRUST
Trust creates space for partners to address their own priorities, whilst acknowledging their expertise and remaining available to support them and their concerns.

MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY
Accountability should be understood on both sides of funding relationships and beyond reports.

EQUITABLE ACCESS TO RESOURCES
We do our best to not apply for donor grants which our partners could apply for directly.

RESPONSIVENESS
We have employed a certain level of flexibility that has allowed us to respond to our partners’ changing needs and emerging challenges, rather than adopting a rigid strategy that favours deliverables to impact.

LEARNING
Real collaboration is not only about doing things together at each stage; it also creates opportunities for joint learning and knowledge production.

TRANSPARENCY
We work for greater transparency in terms of how decisions are made and who is involved in decision making.

FEMINIST SOLIDARITY
Resourcing women and feminist organisations is an act of solidarity. We stand firm beside those working to define, defend, and develop a space for the advancement of peace, equality, justice, and demilitarised security.

TAILORED, CONSULTATIVE, ADAPTIVE AND ORGANIC
Support plans are developed based on partners’ expressed needs, challenges, and contexts and delivered through power-with/horizontal relationships and communication channels.

FLEXIBILITY
We remain flexible and adaptive to contexts and changes, including adjusting activities to account for unforeseen challenges and context-specific holidays or observances.

BUILT ON EXPERTISE
Plans are adopted and implemented that build on partners’ strengths and expertise.

SPACE FOR NETWORKING AND COORDINATION
Support programmes should be shaped in a way that allows for networking and coordination between partner organisations, as well as fostering feminist movement building.

EQUITY AND INCLUSIVITY
Practices include accepting proposals in organisations’ preferred languages, co-developing support in close partnership with organisations to ensure their unique needs and contexts are reflected, and more.

CONFLICT SENSITIVITY AND CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING
We strive to understand the challenges of working in a conflict setting which requires ongoing risk management and changes to implementation.
Launched as a pilot project in 2018, the Feminist Movement for Change in Syria (FMCS) project was the first to adopt the comprehensive three-pronged framework of WILPF’s Holistic Feminist Resourcing Approach.

Through flexible funding, tailored technical support, and a range of networking and coordination opportunities, the project has allowed partners to focus on strategic, sustainable, and long-term planning as they work towards their feminist visions.

Implemented through a locally informed participatory process to ensure it responded to the lack of flexible funding, confronted the complex realities faced by Syrian scarcity of support for capacity and development.

PILLAR 1: FLEXIBLE FUNDING

Using a flexible approach to funding, WILPF sought to free Syrian feminist leaders from some of the constant pressure of meeting basic costs, allowing them the time and resources they need to think and act strategically, focus on their organisational needs, and further their feminist agendas.

In other words, by adopting flexible core funding instead of project-based and top-down funding policies driven by donor needs and interests, resources can be allocated where they are most needed as identified by each organisation’s leaders and staff.

Each organisation used the funds differently. Administrative costs, IT support and equipment, office space, legal fees, outreach costs, training spaces and course development, team-building retreats, translation services, community based initiatives for youth and women, and awareness raising campaigns are just a few examples of how WILPF’s flexible funding enabled our partners in Syria to meet their unique needs over the course of the project.

“We did not have academic or organisational experience. Usually, donors tell us what to do and it is not about what we need. WILPF’s project allows us to focus on why the organisation was established: to focus on women issues, women’s rights, and child support. This is what we want to do.”

– Syrian partner organisation

Feminist Movement for Change in Syria partner organisations

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PILLAR 2: TAILORED TECHNICAL SUPPORT

Providing tailored technical support means adapting support tactics to each individual organisation’s needs, contexts, and capacities. To achieve this, WILPF worked closely with Syrian partner organisations to co-develop a collective technical support plan designed to ensure the most effective combination of support would be available. Depending on the type of support required, WILPF provided assistance via internal expertise, through partner organisations, and through feminist consultant experts from the region.

The webinars were designed and conducted in a participatory approach. This was really interesting and never boring. Allowing space for participants to share examples and issues was very indeed impactful and helped us relate to some of the similarities but also understand the work and the challenges faced by other groups.

– Syrian partner organisation

Areas of support provided

- Human resources
- Risk management
- Financial management
- Operations and programming
- Coordination and partnerships
- Sustainability and development of feminist agenda
- Feminist leadership
- Safeguarding and mentorship
- Women’s political participation at the grassroots level
- Psychosocial support
- Gender mainstreaming
- Media and communications
- Feminist governance

PILLAR 3: BRAVE SPACES FOR PEER EXCHANGE AND COORDINATION

Feminist spaces that allow for exchange of knowledge and experiences enable organisations to develop and maintain networks and collaboration and foster feminist movement-building.

To ensure our partner organisations in Syria have access to the feminist spaces they need to enhance their feminist movement building activities, WILPF used virtual platforms to enable cross-border connections and organised in-person convenings and trainings for those able to travel.

One key factor in ensuring the successful implementation of these feminist spaces is to adopt a collaborative and participatory approach. Partners feel more agency over feminist spaces when they are included in the design of the convenings. This can be achieved by holding calls to assess key themes/points of discussion partners are interested in or by sharing a questionnaire.

14 out of 18 partners

Reported that they had established:

- New Working Relationships
- Collaboration
- Increased Communication

Brave Feminist Spaces are inclusive, accessible, feminist spaces where, together with our partners, we have tried to gear our collective thinking and reflection in a non-judgmental open-minded and accepting way, without criticism.

I spoke to several partners about our work and at more than one point we were able to come up with ideas we can collaborate on to overcome some difficulties and challenges that we face.

– Syrian partner organisation
In 2022, WILPF conducted an impact assessment to better understand how the Feminist Movement for Change in Syria project impacted the ability of partner organisations to advance their feminist agendas.

Through the assessment, three primary themes emerged during our meetings with partners and in connection with their feedback about the project: sustainability, feminism, and movement building.

In the following pages, we explore these themes and highlight key examples of impact shared by partner organisations.
Diverse definitions of sustainability

Notions of “sustainability” were defined differently by each partner, depending on their size, context, presence, and needs. For some, their sustainability was enhanced due to PSS support and prioritising the mental health of the team; for others, it was the physical space for feminist organising; and for others still, it was the connections and networks with Syrians from both inside and outside of Syria, or in the form of core support.

In light of inflexible and highly politicised funding policies, the prioritisation of humanitarian support in Syria, the long-lasting war, and multifold challenges on the ground inside and outside Syria, feminist organisations working towards peace are often under constant pressure to meet basic costs. As a result, they are forced to neglect their long-term feminist goals and the development of the organisation itself, which puts their sustainability at constant risk.

An organisation’s sustainability has further been linked to partnerships and networks that allow for collective growth, which is the core of the project’s third pillar—the creation of brave spaces for peer exchange and coordination.

Addressing basic needs

For an organisation in a challenging context like Syria to be sustainable, resources are needed in the most basic areas— including buying stationery, setting up an office, creating a website, and establishing HR policies. The achievement of these basic elements also enables the establishment of safe workspaces, transfer of feminist knowledge, and women’s economic and political empowerment.

Now we have a place to go and be together as a core team of five. We feel we can sustain ourselves. We do not feel insecure anymore, nor anxious about how to cover the salaries; and now can develop policies and work on the governance of the organisation.

— Syrian partner organisation

Sustainability is not any less of a challenge for feminist organisations working in neighbouring countries or the diaspora. Syrian organisations operating from Europe, Turkey, and Lebanon also struggle to maintain their growth and survival, against multifold and diverse challenges.

Through the three pillars of the Feminist Movement for Change in Syria project, partners were able to initiate much needed and significant change within their organisations, wherever they are based.

The flexible fund released pressure from the executive team, and allowed them to not constantly worry about gaps within the organisation, but rather focus more on its actual role and wish to foster relationships with women both inside Syria and in neighbouring countries, in order to make the organisation stronger and sustainable.

— Syrian partner organisation based in Europe.

Navigating the impacts of COVID-19

In 2020, as COVID19 started to present unpredictable challenges to the work of our partners and drastic shifts in donor priorities, flexible funding helped our partners quickly adapt their plans to mitigate difficulties and fulfill their urgent needs, allowing them to survive a very challenging phase and to even grow stronger.

We cannot be productive without having a healthy workplace. If we don’t take care of people’s well-being, we will lose them. Working in a war context makes psychosocial support very necessary.

— Syrian partner organisation based in Lebanon

This was the only fund we received this year; and it allowed us to continue and work on issues that are important to our cause, while being able to pay our running costs. Our existence was in danger due to lack of money, but this fund allowed us to think about the future and how to proceed.

— Syrian partner organisation based in Turkey

The ENABLING SUSTAINABILITY

WILPF’s Syria project seeks to address this challenge by making sure that partners have the time and resources to think and act strategically, and to focus on their core goals. Free from restrictions or caveats, WILPF’s flexible funding approach allows partners to deepen their impact in the communities they serve by advancing their core activities and services, focusing on the well-being and capacity building of their members and staff, prioritising organisational assets, and thinking strategically. Each organisation has used the funds differently, enabling our partners to meet their unique needs and enhancing their sustainability.

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ADVANCING FEMINIST AGENDAS

In Syria, access to knowledge and resources is restricted due to general instability and continuous disruptions in internet connectivity and power outages, which also limit opportunities for technical support, networking, and collaborating. Moreover, feminist knowledge produced has largely been Western-centric, or mostly produced in English (i.e. mostly due to language barriers or the colonial aspect of knowledge production and sharing). These challenges can make it difficult for Syrian organisations to invest in feminist spaces and build feminist knowledge to strengthen their work and impact.

Through the Syria project, partner organisations were able to access a wide range of context-specific resources, supports, and spaces that helped strengthen their feminist knowledge, establish connections with other like-minded organisations and activists, and implement new practices and policies to sharpen their focus on advancing feminist approaches to peace.

For example, through training sessions on the topic of intersectional feminism, organisations benefitted from an improved understanding of how women’s unique contexts and identities shape their realities and lived experiences. Some organisations have used the flexible funding provided to engage in ongoing courses and exchange programs that broaden their feminist knowledge production and feminist identity, and others have developed improved policies on harassment and sexual abuse in the workplace with technical support from WILPF around feminist governance, leadership, and human resources.

Partner organisations have repeatedly expressed that they have also been able to share and disseminate the knowledge and support they received from WILPF with other organisations, individuals, and communities – thus extending the reach of their feminist agenda and strengthening the movement for feminist peace in Syria.

One partner shared that they offered theatre workshops for teenagers, focusing on topics such as gender and forced child marriage. Further, when their communication officer left, WILPF agreed to reallocate the money, enabling the partner to hire three women to focus on issues such as honour killings and domestic violence. The women were able to bring these issues to the media, moving beyond the limited visibility of such topics on social media alone. Due to WILPF’s flexibility, they were able to strengthen the feminist agenda.

CREATING SPACES FOR FEMINIST DIALOGUE

One partner organisation reported that the technical support they received from WILPF allowed them to initiate discussions, and to develop a vocabulary as a tool to speak about change — which was impossible prior to the 2011 revolution. The training they received allowed them to deconstruct and build together, and to create their own narrative as a community of women who are connected to the ground and living the daily reality in Syria.

A lot of the feminist organisations we work with and the humanitarian ones don’t have the political interests that WILPF has. WILPF is an organisation that is anti-militarist; and it will directly speak out against governments, it’s very much aligned with how we work. It’s not beating about the bush, it’s not a blase feminism, it’s very direct, it’s very strong and very specific.

— Syrian partner organisation

MAKING FEMINIST CHANGES

With the support provided through this project, organisations made a wide range of changes to their operations, practices, and policies that strengthened their feminist agendas. These changes included developing their policies from a feminist perspective, more nuanced wordings throughout their policies and general materials, expansion of their organisational vocabulary, and becoming more aware of power dynamics and knowing how to analyse them.

For instance, one partner developed their first set of feminist values and published them on their website. They also put together a code of conduct and added feminist principles and gender inclusive language to their HR policy. In addition, the organisation created a mission statement and feminist glossary, reviewed its recruitment and exit procedures, and is working on launching a new website. It also plans to change its name this year to make its feminist identity more visible.

When your knowledge expands, you feel more powerful. The partnership with WILPF is not based on someone who is strong and the other is weak. It feels that our cause is also WILPF’s cause. They believe in you, which is empowering. The relationship with WILPF always encourages us to continue; it empowers us because as Syrians it is easy to feel down.

— Syrian partner organisation
**Building the Movement**

Building a strong feminist movement relies on the ability of organisations to quickly react to developments as they occur, mobilise like-minded activists and allies to take action, share knowledge widely, and take advantage of unique opportunities to raise awareness, funds, and support.

In Syria, feminist organisations have struggled to build strong and sustainable movements due to the challenges of general instability, inconsistent connectivity, and lack of technical support, but also due to the relative invisibility of women in Syrian society.

As one partner organisation explains, it can be very difficult to connect with and work with women in Syria as cultural norms favour men as decision-makers while women are relegated to the shadows. It can also be dangerous for women to be visible in public life, and difficult to convince men to support women’s participation in civil society.

Through the Feminist Movement for Change in Syria Project, partner organisations have used flexible funding, technical support, and the creation of safe spaces for convening and collaborating to build the movement for feminist peace. With WILPF’s support, partners have leveraged online and in-person gatherings to share information about what is happening on the ground and to network and coordinate initiatives.

Partners have also used funds creatively to reach different groups of women and encourage their involvement – including, for example, women farmers facing discrimination, sexism, and abuse and women facing harassment or discrimination at Friday prayer.

By having access to the resources and opportunities they need to connect with others, conduct outreach, and mobilise for change, partners participating in this project have made significant progress toward building the feminist peace movement in Syria and laying the foundation for continued growth.

**Shifting Mindsets**

One partner explained that the feminist knowledge production they have been able to develop with support from WILPF is helping them build the grassroots intersectional movement in Syria by seeking to shift how people think about feminism in the country. WILPF’s flexible fund has supported them in this regard:

> So that it [feminism] encompasses women who don’t have our advantages, women who are from lower socio-economic backgrounds, women who don’t have the same literacy rates as us, women from rural geographies. So that in itself, the type of feminism that we’re trying to work towards is a very inclusive and encompassing type. So that it is in the benefit of all women, when we’re able to consolidate this movement, basically.

— Syrian partner organisation

**Building Trust and Strengthening the Movement**

Another partner emphasised the synergies and collaborations that are being built thanks to the project. This partner chose to use their flexible funds to support other organisations that are unregistered and/or in challenging locations, resulting in a strengthened movement and shared trust among partners. They have also created a common WhatsApp group for all partners to work on collective projects and advocacy, and ‘copy’ each other’s campaigns.

> This flexible fund is important for the feminist movement in Syria because it allows us to see the impact, leads to an accumulation of knowledge, and allows the movement to grow and take action on the ground. It is contributing to the future, the transition phase and future of Syria beyond political participation. It helps us organise ourselves better and grow in our roles; we are able to lobby and we have time to focus on previous experiences to see how we can move forward.

— Syrian partner organisation

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Applying the innovative Holistic Feminist Resourcing Approach, WILPF’s Feminist Movement for Change in Syria project is playing an important role in helping Syrian organisations make progress towards their goals and their visions of feminist peace.

Moving beyond the mainstream practices of donor-guided, project-based funding and humanitarian support, the project has enabled investment in the feminist movement and the creation of feminist agendas and spaces for collaboration, networking, and mobilisation.

Building feminist peace requires a multi-layered approach; it moves beyond the narrow definition of peace as the "absence of violence and war" and emphasises the need to focus on an approach that is both intellectual and action oriented.

WILPF’s three-pronged approach does exactly that: it tackles oppressive structures on multiple levels, offers intellectual and action-oriented empowerment, and brings forward tools and mechanisms that foster long-term feminist peace.