

WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS AND THEIR IMPACT ON DISASTER RESPONSE

The 6 February 2023 Earthquakes in Türkiye

ENGLISH EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | 2024 RESEARCH



Purpose and central argument

This research documents how women's rights organisations and grassroots women's groups responded to the February 2023 earthquakes in Adıyaman and Kahramanmaraş. It examines not only the assistance they provided, but also the local relationships, feminist perspectives and solidarity practices that enabled them to act. Its central finding is that women's organisations were not simply supplementary service providers: they identified overlooked needs, mobilised communities, adapted responses and helped shape recovery despite limited resources and unequal access to formal humanitarian structures.

Research approach and scope

Grounded in ÇemberDE's feminist positioning and field experience after the earthquakes, the study sought to make women's organisations' often-overlooked response experiences visible. It draws on questionnaires and in-depth interviews with eight women's organisations, focus groups with five local women's groups, and a workshop involving 16 women civil-society workers from seven organisations. The research concerns experiences during the first year after the earthquakes and is focused on Adıyaman and Kahramanmaraş. It is a qualitative, practice-oriented study; its findings should not be read as statistically representative of all affected communities.

Key findings

1 | Local relationships and knowledge enabled rapid, adaptive action

Existing networks, community trust, volunteer relationships and experience in organising were crucial forms of response capacity. Small, locally connected organisations could identify needs directly and adjust activities as conditions changed. The study describes psychosocial support, safe spaces, protection-related work, distribution of food and essential goods, menstrual health and hygiene support, mother-baby supplies, children's activities, livelihood initiatives and rights-related information. These responses often addressed gender-specific needs missed by standardised assistance.

The report highlights the contribution of women volunteers associated with KADİM in Kahta, Adıyaman, and the Mutlu Besin Women's Cooperative in Türkoğlu, Kahramanmaraş. Their local presence and established relationships helped connect incoming assistance with actual needs. This demonstrates why pre-existing women's organising should be recognised as part of disaster preparedness, not merely as a resource activated after a crisis.

2 | Women were organisers of recovery, not only recipients of aid

Some women's groups formed or consolidated around sewing, knitting and public education courses. Over time, these became spaces for mutual care, shared production, collective problem-solving and community action. Where formal psychosocial or social services were insufficient, women supported one another, developed collective initiatives, communicated needs to institutions and sought to improve their living environments. The study therefore documents disaster response as a potential site of collective agency and new forms of women's organising—not only relief delivery.

3 | Local leadership coexisted with exclusion from resources and decisions

Participants reported inadequate funding and personnel, logistical barriers, permission-related difficulties, rapidly shifting needs and gaps in specialist psychosocial support. Some women's organisations also struggled to access humanitarian coordination meetings: venues were difficult to reach, meetings took place in English, agendas could be distant from local priorities, and organisations were sometimes unaware that meetings were taking place. These were not only operational inconveniences; they affected whose knowledge entered coordination processes and who could influence priorities. The report also notes that comparatively little large-scale humanitarian funding reached women's rights organisations.

4 | Women humanitarian workers also needed care and protection

Women civil-society workers experienced inadequate sanitation, menstrual hygiene facilities and privacy, safety concerns, restrictive gender norms, overwhelming workloads and insufficient organisational attention to well-being. Burnout and secondary trauma were identified as risks. Yet participants also described how taking responsibility during response strengthened their confidence, solidarity and public roles. A women's football initiative in Adıyaman illustrates how collective activity could support both empowerment and well-being. Sustainable feminist response must therefore attend to the people providing care and assistance.

Feminist knowledge, local leadership and humanitarian power

The research treats women's organisations' field experience as knowledge relevant to humanitarian decisions. Their proximity to communities enabled them to interpret gendered needs, identify gaps and adapt interventions. At the same time, the organisations producing this knowledge often lacked equivalent access to funds, formal coordination and decision-making. This tension raises a wider question for humanitarian localisation: how can grassroots women's organisations move from being consulted or tasked with implementation to meaningfully shaping response priorities, resource allocation and recovery decisions?

The study itself is an effort to document and circulate feminist field-based learning. It does not claim that participating women's groups jointly governed the research process or controlled its analysis. Its contribution lies in making their experiences and the structural barriers they faced visible, and in arguing that these experiences should inform future policy and practice.

Recommendations for policy and practice

Invest before disasters. Strengthen existing women's organisations and emerging grassroots groups through long-term organisational support, safe community spaces, mentoring, peer learning and preparedness activities.

Shift resources and access. Provide sustained funding and rapid, flexible emergency resources; improve logistical, technological and psychosocial capacities without imposing disproportionate administrative burdens on small organisations.

Share decision-making power. Ensure women's organisations can participate meaningfully in public and humanitarian coordination; address language, transport, information and scheduling barriers, and use their local knowledge to shape needs assessments, programme design and recovery priorities.

Support collective care and workers' well-being. Integrate safe working conditions, psychosocial support, privacy and gender-sensitive protections into preparedness and response planning.

Turn experience into shared learning. Document and exchange women's disaster-response knowledge, connect local groups with national and international networks, and use their findings in advocacy for gender-equal disaster policy and reconstruction.

Conclusion

The February 2023 earthquakes revealed a central contradiction: women's organisations were essential to responsive, community-rooted humanitarian action, yet were often excluded from the structures controlling resources and decisions. Recognising their leadership requires more than celebrating local resilience. It requires sustained investment in women's organising, equitable access to coordination and resources, and a real role for women's knowledge in shaping humanitarian action.

SOURCE | "6 Şubat Depremleri Kapsamında Kadın Örgütlerinin Afet Müdahale Etkisi Araştırma Raporu" (2024), 45 pages. Research: Gülfer Kırbaş and Merve Ayşe Köseoğlu; report prepared by Gülfer Kırbaş. Supported by the Türkiye Local NGO Humanitarian Forum. This document is an abridged English synthesis, not a full translation.