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Cover image: A women's community group responsible for village emergency preparedness, DRR planning, and women's savings bank, Pyapon Township, Ayeyarwady Delta, Myanmar, 2013. © Francesca Paola Traglia

The invisible architecture of care: Feminist leadership and systems transformation in humanitarian response

A research paper by Francesca Paola Traglia

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I am grateful to the women's community safety teams, local partners, activists and colleagues whose leadership and courage continue to shape my thinking on care and humanitarian action, and who daily embody the feminist futures this article imagines.

Abstract

In a time of escalating crises, rising authoritarianism, and erosion of global solidarity, this paper argues that humanitarian response can be reimagined through the lens of care. Drawing from feminist leadership theory and field-based insights, this paper proposes care as a core principle of humanitarian preparedness and response, not a secondary or sentimental value. It contends that women's community-based networks—grounded in co-creation, collective design, and knowledge of safety and need—already embody a practical form of systems transformation often overlooked by formal humanitarian structures. Through a feminist lens, "care" is reframed as both method and power: an organising principle that dissolves hierarchies, strengthens social cohesion, and restores humanity in leadership. The paper calls for humanitarian organisations to recognise care as operational strategy, epistemology, and ethical infrastructure in times of crisis. Integrating care as a guiding principle of humanitarian system design implies strategic shifts: from coordination to co-creation, from compliance-based models to those grounded in trust and adaptive capacity, and from procedural efficiency to relational ethics. The paper argues that the invisible architecture of care already offers a living blueprint for systems transformation—the challenge for humanitarian leadership is to make it visible, valuable, and central.

Leadership relevance

This paper contributes to humanitarian leadership practice and systems transformation by redefining care as a leadership function essential to preparedness, coordination, and community resilience. It challenges traditional notions of authority and expertise in humanitarian systems, offering an alternative framework where leadership emerges from collaborative networks, relational intelligence, and feminist ethics. By embedding care-based practices into planning and decision-making, humanitarian leaders can transform reactive crisis management into sustained systems of shared responsibility and peacebuilding grounded in justice.

Introduction: The crisis of humanitarian leadership

The accelerating rate of global crises is forcing the humanitarian system to confront an uncomfortable truth: our leadership models—built for command, control, and delivery—are ill-equipped for complexity, fragmentation, and persistent inequality. From climate disasters to armed conflict and prolonged displacement, humanitarian response increasingly operates in contexts defined by uncertainty and contestation, where hierarchical leadership and transactional systems of aid are reaching their limits.

The year 2025 witnessed what many now recognise as profound disarray within the humanitarian sector. According to UNHCR's Global Trends report, 123.2 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced at the end of 2024 — equivalent to one in every 67 people on Earth and nearly double the figure of a decade ago (UNHCR, 2025). Meanwhile, international humanitarian assistance fell by nearly US\$5 billion in 2024, the largest single-year funding drop ever recorded (Development Initiatives, 2025). By October 2025, only 23.4 per cent of the \$45.37 billion required to meet global humanitarian needs had been received — a 43 per cent decline compared to the same period the prior year (OCHA, 2025). These funding contractions have produced workforce crises of historic scale: UNHCR has cut 30 per cent of its staff, WFP faces a 30 per cent workforce reduction, and OCHA has laid off 20 per cent of personnel while suspending operations in nine countries (Development Aid, 2025). Protection sectors have been hardest hit, with gender-based violence and child protection services facing the sharpest cuts — leaving women and children, who constitute the majority of the forcibly displaced, without critical support (Feminist Humanitarian Network, 2024; OCHA, 2025).

This crisis is not merely a budgetary downturn. As scholars of humanitarian governance have documented, moments of institutional contraction expose the underlying logics—the standards, audit cultures, and technocratic frameworks—that structure how international systems function (Barnett, 2011; Fassin, 2012; Duffield, 2007). What we are witnessing is a return to what Barnett and Weiss (2011) describe as the unregulated, competitive humanitarianism of the 1990s—an era characterised by minimal coordination, weak accountability, and the dominance of large Northern agencies—undoing decades of feminist and evidence-based progress.

That progress has been real: from the adoption of gender mainstreaming commitments across the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) in the early 2000s, to the Sphere Humanitarian Charter (1998, revised 2018), to the Women, Peace and Security agenda anchored in UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), the sector has built normative frameworks that explicitly centre gender, protection, and participation (Sphere Association, 2018; True, 2012; Prügl, 2015). The current contraction

risks dismantling these gains, fostering deep stress and moral injury among those charged with delivering aid (Humanitarian Leadership Academy, 2025).

Yet in this moment of crisis, a different kind of leadership is quietly demonstrating its power. In refugee camps across Cox's Bazar, in urban settlements in Jordan and South Sudan, and in displacement contexts across Myanmar and Pakistan, women's community safety teams and grassroots care networks continue to hold. In Cox's Bazar alone, community-led women's networks have been documented detecting gender-based violence before formal reporting mechanisms, coordinating care pathways through trusted interpersonal channels, and maintaining protection functions even as international staffing contracts (Feminist Humanitarian Network, 2024).

In Pakistan's flood-displaced communities, women's neighbourhood groups have similarly functioned as first-line responders, managing resource distribution and psychosocial support in the absence of formal systems (UN Women, 2022). They anticipate risks, coordinate protection, mediate conflict, and sustain the social fabric when formal systems falter. Their work is often invisible, rarely compensated, and systematically marginalised in decision-making, but reveals a truth the humanitarian system has long overlooked: care is not soft power, but structural intelligence. It is the foundation upon which social cohesion, trust, and resilience are built (Tronto, 1993; Ramalingam, 2013).

In a TEDx talk titled "The Invisible Architecture of Care," the author reflected on a scene witnessed repeatedly in humanitarian contexts: when systems crack under pressure, it is women who rise, organising, redistributing, and repairing. This observation is not sentimental; it is an empirical claim about the architecture of humanitarian survival, grounded in situated field knowledge (Haraway, 1988; Prügl, 2020). It is also a call to action: to recognise and centre care as a pillar of feminist humanitarian leadership and as a strategy for systems transformation.

When systems crack under pressure, it is women who rise, organising, redistributing, and repairing.

This paper contributes to growing scholarly and practitioner debates on humanitarian systems transformation and feminist leadership (Barnett, 2011; Ramalingam, 2013; Humanitarian Leadership Academy, 2025). It argues that recognising care as a central principle of humanitarian response—embedded in standards, decision-making, and system design—is both an ethical imperative and a pragmatic necessity for the sector's survival and renewal.

Theoretical framework: Care as feminist leadership

Care has been defined in multiple ways across disciplines, but within feminist political theory the most influential formulation remains Tronto's (1993, p. 103): "everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible." This is not a definition confined to interpersonal tenderness, it is an explicitly political claim about the labour required to sustain human life and social systems. For Gilligan (1982), care is equally a moral epistemology: a "different voice" that centres relationships, context, and responsiveness over abstract universal rules. Together, these frameworks establish care as both a political obligation and a mode of knowing—precisely the dual function this paper argues is missing from formal humanitarian leadership.

Yet the humanitarian system has historically treated care as peripheral, associating it with "soft skills," moral virtue, or women's unpaid labour (Tronto, 1993; Hochschild, 1983; Folbre, 2001). This is not incidental: globally, women perform 76.2% of all unpaid care work, spending on average 201 days per year on unpaid labour compared to 63 days for men (ILO, 2018, as cited in Lokot, 2020). The humanitarian sector reproduces this dynamic structurally. Care-intensive roles such as protection, psychosocial support, and community liaison are systematically underfunded relative to logistics, supply chain, and security (Feminist Humanitarian Network, 2024). This conceptual marginalisation mirrors the gendered hierarchies that structure humanitarian institutions themselves, privileging technical expertise and command-control leadership over relational, affective, and community-based forms of knowledge.

In *In a Different Voice* (1982), Carol Gilligan challenged the dominant Kohlbergian model of moral development—grounded in abstract justice and individual rights—by demonstrating that women's moral reasoning tends to be relational, contextual, and oriented toward maintaining connections rather than applying universal rules (Gilligan, 1982). A decade later, in *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (1993), Joan Tronto extended this relational ethics into explicitly political terrain, identifying four irreducible phases of care: attentiveness (recognising need), responsibility (assuming accountability), competence (meeting need effectively), and responsiveness (remaining open to the cared-for's reaction) (Tronto, 1993, pp. 105–108). Tronto reframed care as both practice and political obligation, a framework that recognises interdependence not as weakness but as the ontological condition of human life. In *Caring Democracy* (2013), Tronto went further still, arguing that care should serve as the organising principle of democratic governance, a vision that resonates directly with this paper's argument about care as humanitarian system design (Tronto, 2013).

Within humanitarian action, this reframing offers a profound shift in leadership logic: from managing crisis to sustaining relationships in crisis. Where Gilligan (1982) insists that moral maturity lies in the capacity to hold the tension between care for self and care for others without abandoning either, humanitarian leadership grounded in care must similarly resist the pressure to reduce human beings to "beneficiaries"—categories that sever the relational ties through which safety and dignity are actually maintained. Tronto's (1993) political ethics of care adds an institutional dimension: it is not enough for individual leaders to be caring; the systems, standards, and architectures through which humanitarian response is organised must themselves be designed to care: to attend, respond, and remain accountable to those most affected by crisis.

It is not enough for individual leaders to be caring; the systems, standards, and architectures through which humanitarian response is organised must themselves be designed to care: to attend, respond, and remain accountable to those most affected by crisis.

Feminist leadership as a systemic turn

Current humanitarian systems are characterised by entrenched dysfunction that goes beyond resource scarcity. Scholars have documented how hierarchical coordination architectures, technocratic audit cultures, and the concentration of decision-making authority in large Northern agencies systematically exclude local knowledge, reproduce colonial power relations, and marginalise the very communities humanitarian action is meant to serve (Barnett, 2011; Duffield, 2007; Fassin, 2012). These are not accidental failures — they reflect the underlying logics of a system designed around command, control, and measurable delivery rather than relational accountability and adaptive learning (Ramalingam, 2013). Feminist leadership theory directly engages with these structural problems. For example, by challenging who counts as an expert, whose knowledge is treated as legitimate, and how authority is distributed across institutional hierarchies (Prügl, 2015; Tickner & Prügl, 2018).

Feminist leadership theory offers a praxis-oriented approach to transformative systems change, an approach grounded simultaneously in critical theory and concrete practice, oriented toward dismantling structural inequalities rather than optimising existing systems (Batiwala, 2011; ActionAid, 2013). It is grounded in three

principles that have been elaborated across feminist scholarship and practice.

The first principle is 'interdependence as strength'. Where traditional leadership frameworks, rooted in liberal individualism and military command models, view dependency as weakness, feminist thought recognises mutual reliance as the essential condition of resilience and collective survival (Tronto, 1993; Butler, 2004). As Butler (2004, p. 22) argues, "vulnerability and interdependence are not problems to be solved but conditions to be acknowledged," a framing with profound implications for how humanitarian systems should be organised.

The second is, 'power-with, not power-over'. Drawing on Starhawk's (1990) foundational distinction between domination-based power and collaborative power, feminist leadership redistributes authority horizontally, building relational accountability and shared decision-making (Starhawk, 1990; Hooks, 2000). In practice, this means treating affected communities and particularly women's networks, as co-authors of response rather than as passive recipients (Feminist Humanitarian Network, 2024; ActionAid, 2026).

The third principle is 'embodied ethics'. Feminist leadership insists that leadership is not only cognitive or procedural but also affective and embodied, and linked to empathy, care, and an awareness of how structural inequalities are experienced in and through bodies, spaces, and relationships (Gilligan, 1982; Tronto, 1993; Ahmed, 2004). This principle directly challenges the disembodied, technocratic model of expertise that dominates humanitarian coordination.

By integrating these principles into humanitarian leadership, practitioners can begin to move from the extractive, hierarchical paradigms, characterised by downward accountability, Northern dominance, and the instrumentalisation of local actors, that scholars have extensively critiqued (Barnett, 2011; Duffield, 2007; Lokot, 2021), toward adaptive and participatory ecosystems of decision-making grounded in relational trust, distributed knowledge, and shared accountability (Ramalingam, 2013; Humanitarian Leadership Academy, 2025).

Care as operational intelligence

From protracted displacement in Myanmar, where women's networks operated as de facto protection systems during the Rohingya crisis (Women Peace Network – Arakan, 2016), to urban displacement contexts in the Mediterranean, where feminist solidarity organisations documented providing frontline psychosocial and legal support to migrants and asylum seekers in the absence of adequate state or agency response (Elrha, 2021), informal networks of women have consistently filled the gaps left by formal structures. These are not isolated cases: a systematic review of 48 peer-reviewed studies

across natural disasters, armed conflicts, pandemics, and refugee crises found that women are consistently critical as community responders, caregivers, and local leaders in humanitarian settings, yet remain structurally marginalised within formal humanitarian logistics and coordination systems (Emerald, 2026).

These networks are not merely coping mechanisms. Evidence from community-based protection assessments across multiple contexts documents how women's networks function as distributed care systems, capable of anticipating needs, mapping risks, and orchestrating micro-responses under conditions of uncertainty (UNHCR, 2023; ODI/HPN, 2022). In Cox's Bazar, women's safety teams identified patterns of gender-based violence weeks before they appeared in formal reporting systems (Feminist Humanitarian Network, 2024). In South Sudan, women-led civil society organisations maintain protection monitoring during periods of formal humanitarian access restrictions (WPHE, 2025). In Jordan's Za'atari camp, women's committees pioneered community safety innovations, including improved lighting in high-risk areas, through local knowledge that external agencies had not captured (UNHCR, 2023). Across these contexts, the pattern is consistent: care-based networks produce operational intelligence that formal systems are structurally unable to generate.

Such collective intelligence corresponds to what leadership scholars term adaptive leadership, which is defined by Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009, p. 14) as "the practice of mobilising people to tackle tough challenges and thrive." Adaptive leadership emerges from interconnected relationships, enabling rapid learning and contextual action in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environments. More specifically, Ramalingam (2013) demonstrates in *Aid on the Edge of Chaos* that the humanitarian system's chronic failures stem from its resistance to the kind of distributed, relational, and iterative learning that complex adaptive systems require, precisely what women's care networks embody in practice. These feminised care networks are, in effect, decentralised human systems of preparedness and protection, living examples of the adaptive capacity the formal system claims to seek but consistently fails to resource.

Feminised care networks are, in effect, decentralised human systems of preparedness and protection, living examples of the adaptive capacity the formal system claims to seek but consistently fails to resource.

Yet they remain overlooked, because their operations (often based on intimacy, trust, and reciprocity), do not

conform to the institutional metrics of efficiency and visibility that structure humanitarian accountability systems. As Merry (2011) demonstrates, indicators and audit regimes do not simply measure reality; they produce legible realities, rendering some forms of knowledge visible and others invisible. Humanitarian accountability frameworks, including the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS Alliance, 2022) and cluster coordination systems, overwhelmingly privilege what is quantifiable: coverage rates, access to information, complaints mechanisms, beneficiary numbers and their satisfaction or delivery timelines. The relational, affective, and context-specific intelligence generated through women's care work, like a child's changing behaviour, a shift in community trust, or the early signs of a protection threat, registers nowhere in these systems, even as it shapes the actual quality and reach of humanitarian response (Lokot, 2021; ODI/HPN, 2022).

By acknowledging these care infrastructures as integral to, rather than supplementary to, humanitarian systems, we open the door to transformational leadership practice grounded in empathy and lived local knowledge rather than external control (Ramalingam, 2013; Feminist Humanitarian Network, 2024).

The gendered geography of humanitarian resilience

Across refugee camps, displacement settlements, and urban crisis zones, it is often women's community safety teams that anchor protection and coordination at the micro level. Evidence from community-based protection assessments across multiple humanitarian contexts documents how these teams operate through trust, reciprocity, and embodied awareness. Trust enables access to information that formal actors cannot obtain; reciprocity sustains mutual aid networks that outlast project cycles; and embodied awareness (the capacity to read spatial and relational cues through lived experience of the same environment) produces early warning intelligence that no external assessment tool can replicate (UNHCR, 2023; ODI/HPN, 2022; Lokot, 2021). These teams play multiple roles simultaneously: they are protection analysts, early warning systems, and emotional first responders (Feminist Humanitarian Network, 2024).

My experience in Myanmar's Rakhine State (2013–2018) during the Rohingya crisis revealed how women's networks functioned as *de facto* protection systems, identifying at-risk families and managing community safety long before formal humanitarian structures arrived. Consistent with Haraway's (1988) concept of situated knowledge—the idea that partial, positioned perspectives produce more rigorous and accountable forms of understanding than claims to universal expertise—this field experience is offered not as anecdote but as one data point within a broader, corroborated pattern. This pattern has been documented more recently in Cox's Bazar camps, where community-led women's networks detect

cases of gender-based violence before they escalate and coordinate care pathways through trusted interpersonal channels, operating at a speed and granularity that formal GBV referral systems cannot match (Feminist Humanitarian Network, 2024; Elrha, 2021).

In Jordan's refugee camps, Community Support Committees (CSCs) and women's committees have emerged as critical governance structures. The Women's Committee in Za'atari camp has pioneered safety innovations grounded in community knowledge: in collaboration with UNHCR and partner organisations, the committee identified lighting gaps in high-risk areas of the camp as a primary driver of gender-based violence and led the implementation of solar lighting improvements, a community-identified solution that has been documented as reducing women's and girls' exposure to violence and enabling greater freedom of movement at night (GBV Guidelines, 2018; UNHCR/Blumont, 2019). The committee also established comprehensive childcare centres, enabling mothers to participate in economic, vocational, and training opportunities, translating care infrastructure into women's economic agency (UNHCR, 2023).

In South Sudan, women-led civil society organisations have taken on a distinctive role at the interface of humanitarian response and peacebuilding. Supported through the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF), local women's organisations in South Sudan are channelling financing to frontline women's groups responding to the gender dimensions of displacement, including psychosocial support, protection monitoring, and livelihoods programming for internally displaced populations (WPHF, 2025). Crucially, these organisations have also worked to strengthen the monitoring of gender provisions in the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS, 2018), including Chapter Four commitments to women's representation and gender-responsive transitional justice (Democracy International, 2019; ICAN Peacework, 2024).

Myanmar, Cox's Bazar, Jordan and South Sudan share three structural commonalities. These commonalities point to a critical divergence from the logic of formal humanitarian response. Formal systems are designed for legibility and the production of data, reports, and coverage figures that satisfy donor accountability requirements (Merry, 2011; Shore & Wright, 2015). Women's care networks are designed for relationality: the sustenance of social bonds, trust, and mutual knowledge through which protection is actually practised.

This is not a gap to be bridged by better data collection. It is a structural contradiction between two different epistemologies of crisis response. It is for this reason that care structures are not supplementary to humanitarian response—they are its operating system. When humanitarian access is restricted, funding contracts, or formal coordination stalls, and it is these community safety teams that maintain the connective tissue between crisis response and social life. The challenge for humanitarian

leadership is not to incorporate this insight rhetorically but to redesign systems so that care-based networks are recognised, resourced, and protected as the primary infrastructure of humanitarian response that they already are (Ramalingam, 2013; Feminist Humanitarian Network, 2024; WPHF, 2025).

Care as protection analysis

In most humanitarian handbooks, "protection analysis" is framed as a technical exercise focused on data collection, risk assessment, and external observation. The IASC Protection Policy (2016) defines protection analysis as identifying "who is at risk, of what violations, by whom, and why." It's a framework that, while essential, is overwhelmingly operationalised through data systems, situational reports, and expert assessments conducted by external actors (IASC, 2016; UNHCR, 2018). The Global Protection Cluster's analytical tools, the IASC Gender Handbook (2017), and standard needs assessment frameworks all share a common epistemological assumption: that protection knowledge is produced through systematic, observable, and externally verified data (Global Protection Cluster, 2022; IASC, 2017). Feminist scholarship challenges this assumption directly, arguing that the most granular and actionable protection intelligence is often produced not through formal systems but through sustained, relational presence within affected communities (Lokot, 2021; Hyndman, 2010).

Feminist analysis redefines protection analysis by centring relational and affective knowledge: how people perceive, experience, and navigate insecurity in embodied, everyday terms. Drawing on Hyndman's (2010) feminist geopolitics of humanitarianism, security is not an objective condition to be measured but a lived experience shaped by gender, mobility, spatial control, and social relationships. Lokot (2021) extends this argument, demonstrating that women in displacement contexts navigate insecurity through relational networks by reading social cues, monitoring changes in community behaviour, and anticipating threats through sustained interpersonal contact, in ways that formal protection monitoring systematically fails to capture. Fricker's (2007) concept of hermeneutical injustice is instructive here: when the conceptual resources available to formal systems cannot accommodate a particular form of knowledge (such as the embodied, relational intelligence generated through care) that knowledge is rendered structurally invisible, regardless of its operational value.

Feminist analysis redefines protection analysis by centring relational and affective knowledge: how people perceive, experience, and navigate insecurity in embodied, everyday terms.

As demonstrated through the case evidence presented above, women's safety teams bring a granular understanding of vulnerability that transcends the categories of "beneficiary" or "risk group" that structure formal humanitarian data systems. Through informal mechanisms such as home visits, childcare rotations, and shared cooking, they gather intelligence on patterns of stress, isolation, or threat long before they appear in official reporting. Their analysis is iterative, relational and grounded in how bodies, spaces, and social bonds interact in real time (Feminist Humanitarian Network, 2024; UNHCR, 2023). This is not anecdote; it is a systematic pattern documented across multiple humanitarian contexts and corroborated by community-based protection literature (ODI/HPN, 2022; Baines & Paddon, 2012).

This fundamentally expands what we mean by operational knowledge. It suggests that leadership in crisis contexts should not only mobilise resources but also listen to the social rhythms of care, the everyday practices that illuminate unseen risks and potential entry points for resilience. In organisational terms, embedding this form of grassroots intelligence into leadership structures requires what scholars of humanitarian leadership identify as epistemic humility: the capacity to acknowledge the limits of institutional knowledge and to actively seek out forms of understanding that formal systems cannot generate (Crossan et al., 2021; Ramalingam, 2013). A growing body of evidence identifies humility as a critical leadership quality in humanitarian organisations, precisely because of the complexity and uncertainty of crisis environments and because the communities being served consistently hold knowledge that responding organisations do not (Crossan et al., 2021). The epistemic humility to learn from care rather than simply deploy it, marks the difference between technocratic response and adaptive leadership (Heifetz et al., 2009; Ramalingam, 2013).

Patriarchal and technocratic logics in practice

Recent scholarship on humanitarian design emphasises that institutional frameworks often frame leadership as an individual attribute associated with strategic vision, rapid decision-making, and operational command (Austin & Leander, 2023; Barnett, 2011; Duffield, 2007). This model maps neatly onto militarised and masculinised imaginaries of crisis management, where success is measured in terms of delivery metrics, coverage rates, and compliance with procedural standards. Gender is typically added as a cross-cutting concern—an "add-on" to pre-existing templates—rather than as a force that questions whose knowledge structures the system in the first place (Prügl, 2015; Olivius & Ny, 2019).

Audit cultures, indicator regimes, and certification processes further entrench technocratic logics by defining what counts as legitimate knowledge. As Merry

(2011), Shore and Wright (2015), and Power (1997) have shown in broader governance debates, indicators and audits do not simply measure reality; they produce realities by making some experiences legible and others invisible. In humanitarian settings, this means that the relational, affective, and embodied knowledge produced through women's care work (such as that of community safety teams in refugee camps) rarely appears in high-level situational analyses, leadership discussions, or strategic frameworks (Lokot, 2021; Feminist Humanitarian Network, 2024).

Audit cultures, indicator regimes, and certification processes further entrench technocratic logics by defining what counts as legitimate knowledge.

This paradox is particularly acute in contexts of fiscal austerity: gender-sensitive language proliferates even as gender-transformative practice is undermined by material and financial constraints. Protection and gender services are cut first in budget crises, despite abundant evidence of their centrality to safety and justice (OCHA, 2025; Feminist Humanitarian Network, 2024). Local and feminist organisations are praised rhetorically as the ones "holding the line", yet remain marginal in decision-making, funding, and standard-setting arenas (Feminist Humanitarian Network, 2024; Lowy Institute, 2026).

Feminist leadership as epistemic disruption

Reframing care as feminist leadership directly challenges these orthodoxies. It insists that leadership is not simply about managing systems, but about transforming the epistemic foundations of those systems: who gets to define problems, design responses, and determine what "success" looks like.

From this perspective, women's community safety teams in camps, local protection committees, and feminist organisations do not merely "inform" formal leadership; they embody alternative leadership paradigms. Their work produces situated protection analysis that captures how gender, class, race, disability, sexuality, age, and migration status intersect in concrete experiences of risk; demonstrates collective, non-heroic leadership, where authority is distributed and decisions emerge from dialogue, care, and mutual accountability rather than hierarchical command, and re-designs tools (such as referral pathways, dignity kits, and accountability mechanisms) to reflect local priorities, religious and cultural meanings, and embodied experiences of safety. This is feminist leadership as epistemic disruption: it

contests who counts as an expert and reclaims design spaces that have been dominated by technical and external actors.

Systems transformation through care-based leadership

Building on the critique of humanitarian orthodoxy, this section argues that centring care as feminist leadership provides a concrete pathway for systems. Rather than adding "care" as an ethical add-on, the proposal is to treat care as a design logic for how humanitarian systems are organised, governed, and held to account.

From coordination to co-creation

Conventional coordination mechanisms—clusters, working groups, and inter-agency task forces—are built around a logic of vertical accountability and technical division of labour. They tend to treat communities, and especially women's networks, as sources of "feedback" rather than co-authors of response design. A care-centred approach reimagines coordination as co-creation, where women's community safety teams and local feminist organisations are recognised as core governance actors, not just implementing partners; protection analysis explicitly incorporates relational, gendered, and intersectional knowledge produced through everyday practices of care in camps and crisis-affected communities, and standards and tools (such as CHS commitments, Sphere indicators, and safeguarding protocols) are iteratively adapted with community actors, acknowledging that design itself is a site of politics and contestation.

A care-centred approach reimagines coordination as co-creation, where women's community safety teams and local feminist organisations are recognised as core governance actors, not just implementing partners.

This shift calls for leadership that "amplifies diverse local voices" into organisational routines where decision-making is shared and legitimacy is grounded in lived experience, not only institutional mandate.

Re-designing humanitarian infrastructures

Recent scholarship on humanitarian systems emphasises that humanitarianism is materially constructed through

objects, standards, and infrastructures—that is, through the artifacts, tools, and technical systems that script who is legible as a leader, who is visible as a "beneficiary," and which forms of knowledge count as expertise (Austin & Leander, 2023; Leander, 2016). Therefore, systems transformation must involve re-designing those very artifacts.

Care as a design principle reframes key elements of humanitarian infrastructure in at least three ways. Firstly, instead of reinforcing audit cultures that privilege what is easily measured (Merry, 2011; Power, 1997), care-informed standards ask what communities experience as safety, dignity, and agency, and build indicators around those priorities. This is consistent with the accountability to affected populations frameworks increasingly advocated in humanitarian reform debates (CHS Alliance, 2022).

Secondly, tools for registration, targeting, and accountability (including biometrics) must be evaluated not only for efficiency but for how they redistribute or concentrate power, including their differential impacts on women, queer communities, and other marginalised groups (ICRC, 2024; Duffield, 2007).

Finally, community-based protection structures should be treated as primary infrastructures of safety, with formal agencies supporting and resourcing them rather than displacing or instrumentalising their work (UNHCR, 2023; ODI/HPN, 2022).

Such re-design moves humanitarian practice toward the systems transformation envisioned by scholars and practitioners who argue for more inclusive, equitable, and locally grounded humanitarian coordination, one in which legitimacy is rooted in relational accountability rather than institutional mandate (Ramalingam, 2013; Barnett, 2011; Humanitarian Leadership Academy, 2025).

Leadership as relational agency

The analysis developed across this paper suggests that care-based feminist leadership enables at least three critical capacities for the humanitarian future. This includes the capacity to anticipate and adapt. Women's care networks, including community safety teams, function as early-warning and adaptive systems, reading shifts in risk and need faster than many formal mechanisms (Feminist Humanitarian Network, 2024; Heifetz et al., 2009; Ramalingam, 2013). Care-based feminist leadership also improves social cohesion under strain. By sustaining everyday practices of support such as childcare, conflict mediation, and safe passage, these networks actively produce the social cohesion that large-scale leadership strategies claim to value but rarely know how to build (Tronto, 1993; Butler, 2004; WPHF, 2025). Finally, this leadership structure increases ethical resilience. Care-centred leadership insists on humanity, dignity, and agency as non-negotiable even

under austerity, countering tendencies to treat rights, protection, and gender justice as optional "extras" when funding declines (Humanitarian Leadership Academy, 2025; Feminist Humanitarian Network, 2024; OCHA, 2025).

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Material politics and the future of humanitarian systems

Recent scholarship on humanitarian design highlights that humanitarianism is materially constructed through objects, standards, and infrastructures (Austin & Leander, 2023; Leander, 2016). Dignity kits, biometric registration systems, accountability dashboards, referral mechanisms, and standards such as those of IASC (2016; 2017), Sphere (Sphere Association, 2018), and CHS (CHS Alliance, 2022) are not neutral tools. They encode assumptions about risk, security, and expertise, often privileging highly technical, Northern-dominated forms of authority (Austin & Leander, 2023; Duffield, 2007). In practice, as Austin and Leander (2023) demonstrate, these artifacts script who is legible as a leader, who is visible as a "beneficiary," and which forms of care and protection are recorded as "real work."

This material politics is crucial for humanitarian leadership debates. Barnett (2011) and Fassin (2012) urge a move beyond surface reform to the underlying architectures of power and knowledge that produce humanitarian hierarchy. When austerity hits, these designs tend to harden around what is easily measurable and auditable, while feminist and relational forms of leadership, such as women's care networks, are further pushed into invisibility (Merry, 2011; Power, 1997; Feminist Humanitarian Network, 2024).

The post-2025 humanitarian contraction functions as a critical test case for how global humanitarian materiality is reconfigured under pressure. Austerity does not only reduce resources; it reorders priorities and reveals which logics are treated as non-negotiable (Oxfam, 2022). Evidence from the Feminist Humanitarian Network's (2024) report *Still Holding the Line* shows that, under austerity, local and feminist organisations become the most consistent lifeline for communities, even as formal systems remain centred on themselves and distant from first responders. The Lowy Institute (2026) further documents that only 1.2% of humanitarian

aid was primarily targeted for gender equality across the decade 2013–2024, a figure that renders visible the structural gap between gender-equality rhetoric and resource allocation. This raises a critical research question that this paper advances for future investigation: does austerity-driven redesign sustain or undermine gender-transformative, locally led forms of care and governance? The early evidence suggests that, unless actively contested, austerity reinforces what Prügl (2016) and Dabrowski (2021) term "neoliberal feminist" logics: those that instrumentalise gender language and women's participation for institutional legitimacy, while sidelining the transformative, care-based practices that do not fit audit templates and cannot be captured in coverage metrics (Prügl, 2016; Dabrowski, 2021; Feminist Humanitarian Network, 2024).

Toward a care-centred humanitarian future

If the humanitarian sector is to move beyond crisis management towards genuine renewal, it must recognise that the invisible architecture of care already offers a living blueprint for systems transformation (Tronto, 2013; Ramalingam, 2013; Feminist Humanitarian Network, 2024). The challenge for humanitarian leadership is no longer to invent new paradigms in isolation, but to learn from, resource, and be reshaped by the feminist care practices that have been "holding the line" all along (Feminist Humanitarian Network, 2024, p. 1).

This requires concrete shifts in how leadership, expertise, and system design are conceptualised. It means treating women's community safety teams and local feminist organisations as co-designers of standards and response

architectures, not merely as implementers of externally determined agendas (CHS Alliance, 2022; Publish What You Fund, 2026; Oxfam, 2025). It requires redistributing epistemic authority, recognising care-based networks as sites of legitimate expertise in protection, risk analysis, and preparedness. It demands a move from centralised "best practice" dissemination toward iterative co-creation grounded in community-led interpretation of tools. Most fundamentally, it calls for recognising care as central to humanitarian futures (Tronto, 1993; Held, 2006; Butler, 2004).

As global politics drift towards isolationism and authoritarianism, grassroots architectures of solidarity remind us that the future of humanitarian leadership will not be determined in conference halls but in community kitchens, shared courtyards, and women's meeting spaces. By making the invisible architecture of care visible, valuable, and central to how humanitarian systems are organised, the sector can take the first step toward leadership that is truly transformative, just, and rooted in the collective agency of those most affected by crisis (Barnett, 2011; Ramalingam, 2013; Tronto, 2013).

As global politics drift towards isolationism and authoritarianism, grassroots architectures of solidarity remind us that the future of humanitarian leadership will not be determined in conference halls but in community kitchens, shared courtyards, and women's meeting spaces.

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When the system cannot hold: Why humanitarian leadership needs system maturity

Commentary by Sahdia Khan

About the Author

Sahdia Khan is a humanitarian strategist and leadership practitioner working on systems maturity, organisational culture, and change design in mission-driven contexts. She supports leadership and organisational development in humanitarian and social work.

Leadership relevance

This commentary contributes to humanitarian leadership practice by reframing leadership not as individual capability, but as a systemic function shaped by cultural maturity, feedback structures, and absorptive capacity. Drawing on field-based interventions and reflective leadership practice, it introduces a three-track framework (individual, team, organisation) and highlights how well-intentioned leadership often falters in systems that are structurally unprepared to receive or sustain change. The article also presents a leadership barometer developed by the author, offering a practical tool to support cultural reflection and alignment. By drawing on the work of Edmondson, Schein, Coleman, and the Mutomorro Maturity Model, the piece equips leaders with a conceptual lens and language to diagnose fragility, strengthen feedback loops, and embed coherence. In a sector marked by complexity and emotional labour, this paper provides a grounded, non-performative approach to sustaining leadership in humanitarian and care-driven systems.

Leadership is often discussed as though it were primarily a question of individual capability.

When organisations struggle, we look for stronger leaders. We invest in leadership development, coaching, communication training, and resilience-building. We ask whether leaders are sufficiently strategic, emotionally intelligent, or adaptable to guide organisations through complexity. These questions matter. But they may not be the most important ones.

Across humanitarian and care-driven organisations, I have repeatedly observed a different pattern. Leadership does not always fail because leaders are insufficient. Often, leadership struggles because it arrives in systems that lack the maturity to receive it. This distinction matters.

Humanitarian organisations are operating in increasingly demanding environments. Funding pressures, political volatility, workforce fatigue, public scrutiny, and constant change have become normal conditions rather than exceptional circumstances. Organisations are expected to transform while simultaneously responding to crisis.

Yet many change efforts continue to be analysed through an individual lens. When initiatives stall, explanations frequently focus on leadership style, communication,

resistance to change, or personal fit. What receives less attention is the system itself.

What if the problem is not primarily the leader? What if the problem is the organisation's capacity to absorb clarity, accountability, feedback, and change without translating them into conflict, avoidance, or exhaustion?

What if the problem is not primarily the leader? What if the problem is the organisation's capacity to absorb clarity, accountability, feedback, and change without translating them into conflict, avoidance, or exhaustion?

I refer to this capacity as system maturity.

System maturity is not about sophistication or organisational age. It is the ability of an organisation to process feedback, distribute accountability, sustain coherence under pressure, and integrate conflict without destabilisation.

In mature systems, difficult conversations can occur without becoming personal. Feedback leads to adaptation. Authority is exercised consistently rather than selectively. Roles are sufficiently clear that responsibility does not depend entirely on relationships or informal influence.

In less mature systems, these same dynamics often operate differently. Ambiguity is described as flexibility. Accountability is softened in the name of care. Conflict is displaced into silence, gossip, or passive resistance. Listening exercises are conducted, but rarely translated into structural change.

The organisation remains active, sometimes intensely so, yet struggles to convert insight into adaptation. This distinction helps explain a recurring paradox in humanitarian leadership.

Many organisations genuinely want greater clarity, stronger accountability, and healthier feedback cultures. Yet when leaders attempt to introduce these conditions, they often encounter resistance. Practices that would be considered routine elsewhere: clear decision-making processes, explicit role boundaries, documented agreements, structured feedback, can be experienced as disruptive.

The issue is not necessarily the intervention itself. It is that the organisation has not developed the collective capacity to absorb coherence. In these environments, leadership often becomes compensatory.

Rather than focusing on strategy, leaders spend significant amounts of energy managing ambiguity. Rather than building capability, they absorb tension. Rather than strengthening systems, they become the mechanism through which unresolved organisational dynamics are processed. Over time, this creates a dangerous pattern. The system exports its fragility onto individuals.

Leaders become responsible for carrying contradictions that properly belong to the organisation itself. They are expected to provide clarity where structures remain unclear, create accountability where accountability is inconsistently applied, and sustain trust in environments where feedback rarely leads to consequence. When these efforts inevitably encounter limits, the explanation frequently returns to the individual.

Leaders become responsible for carrying contradictions that properly belong to the organisation itself. They are expected to provide clarity where structures remain unclear, create accountability where accountability is inconsistently applied, and sustain trust in environments where feedback rarely leads to consequence.

The leader was not the right fit. The leader did not communicate effectively. The leader was insufficiently aligned with the culture. Sometimes these explanations are accurate. Often they are incomplete. The more useful question may be whether the system was capable of holding the leadership it requested.

This question led me to develop what I call the Leadership Barometer. The Leadership Barometer is not designed to assess leaders. It is designed to assess the conditions surrounding leadership. Rather than asking whether an individual is effective, it examines how leadership is structurally experienced within an organisation. The framework focuses on a number of interconnected dimensions, including trust, feedback, role clarity, conflict fluency, accountability, and emotional tone. These dimensions are important because they rarely operate independently.

When role clarity is weak, accountability often becomes personal. When conflict is avoided, feedback becomes indirect. When feedback becomes indirect, trust erodes. What appears to be an interpersonal problem is often a manifestation of system design.

The purpose of the barometer is therefore diagnostic rather than evaluative. It helps organisations move from questions about individual behaviour to questions about organisational conditions.

For example:

- Are decisions made through transparent processes or informal relationships?
- Does feedback lead to action or simply circulate?
- Is accountability role-based or loyalty-based?
- Can disagreement be expressed without destabilising relationships?
- Is clarity embedded in the system or negotiated continuously?

These questions shift the conversation in important ways. Instead of asking, “Do we have the right leader?” we begin asking, “Do we have the conditions required for leadership to succeed?”

This shift is particularly relevant in humanitarian settings. The sector has long recognised the importance of leadership development. Less attention has been given to developing the maturity of the systems within which leadership operates. Yet leadership and system maturity cannot be separated.

The most capable leaders will struggle in environments where accountability is inconsistent, authority is personalised, and feedback is disconnected from action. Conversely, organisations with even modest levels of coherence often create conditions in which leadership becomes more stable, distributed, and sustainable.

This suggests a different way of thinking about organisational change. Leadership development remains essential. But it is not sufficient. Without corresponding investment in system maturity, leadership risks becoming performative at best and sacrificial at worst. The challenge facing humanitarian organisations is therefore not simply to produce stronger leaders. It is to create systems capable of holding leadership well.

That means building structures that support clarity rather than relying on personalities. It means embedding accountability into practice rather than treating it as an individual virtue. It means ensuring that feedback leads somewhere. And it means recognising that psychological safety is not the absence of discomfort, but the presence

of conditions that allow difficult conversations to occur productively.

Ultimately, leadership sustainability is not primarily a function of resilience. It is a function of design.

The question is not only whether leaders can carry change. The question is whether the system has prepared itself to receive it. Until we ask that question more often, humanitarian organisations will continue to place extraordinary demands on individuals while leaving the conditions that undermine leadership largely untouched.

The future of humanitarian leadership may depend less on finding exceptional leaders and more on building systems mature enough to hold them.