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Out of the rubble: Rebuilding intersectional feminism

A call for the global feminist movement to meaningfully respond to the earthquake in Syria and Turkey

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[Editor's note: This article was first published in Arabic on 16 February 2023, calling upon the global feminist movement to meaningfully respond to the earthquake in Syria and Turkey.]

For days after the earthquake, Syrians searched for their loved ones under the rubble of destroyed buildings, or in hospital halls that had been bombed in Syria during the war. Some searched in Turkey, where they could not speak

the language. They were left to fend for themselves while accusations and debates flew between the fascist Syrian regime - who caused infrastructural collapse through years of continuous violence, and the suppressed civil organizations and any possible initiatives that could offer aid and rescue - and the bureaucracy of the United Nations and world's wealthy, developed countries, that have resorted to all available arguments to justify why they did not send rescue teams or aid for six days into northwestern Syria.

For three days, the voices of people trapped under the rubble faded away, while their families and Syrian refugee groups shouted for help, asking the world to send aid and rescue teams. The situation could have been handled better, and more lives could have been saved. Even if an earthquake is an unavoidable event, the responsibility to save the survivors under the rubble still falls on the whole world, especially on those who have the ability to help.

We write this call to be a “killjoy” From the term used by Sara Ahmed, a Pakistani-Australian feminist activist and writer, who identifies as a “feminist killjoy”. towards our (feminist) sisters around the world. We wonder why global feminist voices did not call out more loudly and for longer for saving our people and communities. The weakness of these solidarity responses has raised questions about the path that feminists should take to dismantle the hierarchy of victimhood based on the color of their skin, their social class, the borders that they are trapped within, or nationality, or even the length of the conflict through which they have suffered. We write to challenge the normalization of deaths of Syrian people, we who are fighting with you to fight the normalization of gender-based violence.

Judith Butler Judith Butler is a feminist philosopher and American academic and writer with numerous publications in gender studies. She is a significant influence on the third-wave feminist movement and the queer movement. In her book, *The Force of Nonviolence*: “In this world, as we know, lives are not equally valued; their claim against being injured or killed is not always registered. And one reason for this is that their lives are not considered worthy of grief, or grievable. The reasons for this are many, and they include racism, xenophobia, homophobia and transphobia, misogyny, and the systemic disregard for the poor and the dispossessed.” That is why we write this call, with the hope we still have to belong to a global collective movement that can imagine a more just world. We write to register our losses within the feminist interest around the world, and to state that we and our people deserve for the world to act to save us, that the world considers our own lives and the lives of our people worthy of grief, that the world pauses to mourn us.

It is therefore self-evident that the catastrophic earthquake that struck Syria and Turkey is a matter of intersectional feminism. Layers of injustices conceal the systematic racism inherent in the response to the catastrophe in Turkey: the poverty of buildings that collapsed over the heads of their owners, buildings that already stored the weight of political violence after years of airstrikes perpetrated by a fascist regime and a deeply destructive Russian occupation in Syria. Meanwhile, an inept international system that views Syrian lives as less important than others, and thus takes action very slowly, (spending its time) arguing about state sovereignty. How can we not view resistance against all these injustices as a matter at the heart of our feminist struggle?

Why is the earthquake a feminist and intersectional issue?

If women must have a “room of their own” Referring to Virginia Woolf’s book *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), which served as a manifesto for the feminist literary movement in the 20th century. in order to occupy a political, social, and economic position, what if there are no rooms to begin with? Or what if the rooms collapsed upon the heads of their inhabitants and their families? Are feminist efforts today doomed to weakness and lack of creativity (and imagination), limited to issuing wooden statements, no different from any other non-feminist civil society work? How effective is our work if it lacks a feminist approach? Unless we consider power dynamics, social justice, and take tangible action to inspire a new generation of feminists, what purpose does it serve?

Although a natural disaster as immense as this earthquake affects everyone in significant ways, killing and displacing hundreds of thousands, and its successive effects will continue for months, if not years, before reaching any stage of recovery, it remains the duty of feminists to work to create solidarity and take real action to support the victims on several levels and at different stages. This includes immediate, urgent relief and long-term action that does not end when the world’s momentary attention to the crisis ends, forgetting what happened automatically as soon as we become preoccupied with another crisis.

From our position as Syrian women facing the injustices of this world, we demand that our sisters who have the privilege and the ability to move easily across borders and to mobilize resources, to carry out the following actions:

In the short-term:

Form advocacy groups to hold meetings with officials to pressure them to open border crossings and ensure that aid reaches all affected people in all affected regions of Syria, and particularly underprivileged groups. Openly and transparently share the results of these meetings with our people and with yours, and bravely challenge the authorities who moved slowly to save those under the rubble.

Support Syrian feminist groups around the world to address parliaments and governments in wealthy countries, so that they create pressure (a sense of urgency) and convey the voices of women in the affected areas, mention their needs, and identify creative solutions and partnerships to tackle complex and racist visa procedures and movement restrictions. Support international feminist organizations working in media advocacy to ensure equal media coverage of women. At this point, it is widely agreed that media coverage of events in Syria is very weak, largely due to the Syrian regime's ban on any non-government affiliated media coverage in the affected areas under its control. However, even in areas where more fair media coverage is allowed, feminist-minded media coverage is poor or lacking, and is much-needed now and in the future.

Provide direct support to feminists and groups with feminist agendas to be part of emergency response efforts and to carry out their expected role in emergency relief, and to additionally support those working in shelters to establish mechanisms to prevent harassment to every extent possible .

Prioritize supporting both individual feminists and

feminist groups (including women's rights defenders, independent journalists, activists, and others) in the affected areas so that they can in turn recover and continue their fight against injustice and their work.

In the medium-term:

Just days after the earthquake, we started to hear testimonies from women and girls who are experiencing harassment in temporary shelters in Syria and Turkey. This is just the tip of the iceberg, and we will surely witness an increase in gender-based violence cases because disasters deepen pre-existing structural, legal, social, and economic problems faced by women, girls, and other marginalized groups. We therefore demand greater attention and support for feminist relief programs that work on strengthening the intersection between gender-based violence and disaster response. To stand in solidarity with Syrian women and men in Turkey, as they are among the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in the earthquake response there, not to mention the Syrians subject to the racist temporary protection law, Syrian nationals, as well as stateless persons and refugees from Syria, who came to Turkey due to events in Syria after 28 April 2011 are provided with temporary protection (TP) by the Government of Turkey. Syrians under this law, however, have been deported or threatened by deportation if they broke the restriction of movement imposed by the government under the TP regulations. Source: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/24/turkey-hundreds-refugees-deported-syria>. keeping them in a permanent limbo of instability without guaranteed rights or a future.

To continuously assess and advocate for the needs of women and girls in terms of relief, evacuation, housing, recovery, livelihoods, and all other needed services.

To resist donor fatigue and insist that affected women, men, and their communities be prioritized and meaningfully engaged in designing and implementing their own recovery programs.

Last but not least, we call for the formation of independent human rights and legal committees that will hold the United Nations accountable for its failure to respond in Syria, and to demand compensation and apologies for the victims and their families.

In the long-term:

This earthquake is a call for collective thinking and dialogue about our response to all disasters and crises through:

Activating our political imagination so that we can dismantle and transform international systems to respond to the world's needs in a more just manner, and rethinking mechanisms for emergency response during cross-border disasters including the challenges around borders and international immunity. Rethinking the political identity of transnational feminism, and imagining a solidarity that transcends differences. We also call for rethinking ways of activating regional feminist groups within Global South countries so they can be fully effective during a crisis of this magnitude on the ground, and not merely in published literature and research, and resist the isolationist desire to keep to domestic affairs only. Imagine a more active role for the feminist movement in supporting spontaneous collective local action and

response, such as we have seen in Syria and Turkey. There, amidst the shortcomings of governments, the United Nations, and the slow and ineffective response of other international organizations, the burden fell to local civil society organizations that have played the largest – if not the only – meaningful role in rescue and relief operations.

Finally, we offer our condolences to every single victim in Syria and Turkey, and to all the Syrian, Turkish, and Kurdish families who have suffered, including our fellow comrades. We wish we had the opportunity to travel, meet in-person and to mourn this great loss together.