

Centering Women at the Heart of Response Plans: An Interview with Jumanah Zabaneh

Arab Institute for Women

To cite this article: Arab Institute for Women (AiW). (2022). Centering women at the heart of response plans: An interview with Jumanah Zabaneh. *Al-Raida*, 46(2), 105-108. DOI: 10.32380/alrj.v46i2.2529

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.32380/alrj.v46i2.2529>

© 2022 The Author(s)

Corresponding author: Gabriella Nassif

Author contact: al-raida@lau.edu.lb

Article type: Article

Published online: 4th August 2022

Publisher: Arab Institute for Women

Publication support provided by: Escienta

Journal ISSN: 0259-9953

Copyright: This is an Open Access article, free of all copyright, and may be freely reproduced, distributed, transmitted, modified, built upon, or otherwise used by anyone for any lawful purpose. The work is made available under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license.

Centering Women at the Heart of Response Plans: An Interview with Jumanah Zabaneh

Jumanah Zabaneh is a human rights professional whose work focuses on gender equality, child rights, and humanitarian and development programming. Zabaneh is currently a Programme Management Specialist with UN Women in Lebanon and focuses primarily on masculinities and men.

“South-South Cooperation”: Learning from Feminist Initiatives across the Global South

JZ: We [UN Women], like everyone, were devastated by the Beirut Blast. But, we had to respond, so we started reflecting. *What can we do in this situation as UN Women?*

We thought we can learn from UN Women in other countries and so reached out to our office in Nepal and asked them about the work that they did after the earthquake. Among the examples they gave us was that they supported the feminist movement to issue a charter of demands. We were very interested in this idea; but we needed to adapt it to the Lebanese context. We started reaching out to key feminists in the country to get their opinion on the idea.

Developing the Feminist Charter, Building a Movement

JZ: There was a definite interest for developing a feminist charter after the Beirut Blast. And so we started informal consultations and putting together an initial list of demands, which we circulated to a group of feminists and organizations. This created a snowball effect, and people started passing the “news” about the Charter to other people and others began coming on board.

This initial small group was heavily engaged. We received a lot of comments. So, we reworked the draft many times to incorporate as many comments as possible. Through this process, the group continued to expand. We also started making a targeted effort to include diverse actors: We ended up contacting 48 organizations and individuals in total. The idea was to be very inclusive, starting from our own partners, and working to include actors from various sectors and with various focuses, such as women’s political empowerment and women’s economic empowerment actors and organizations.

Amazingly, all the organizations and actors we asked to join ended up joining.

Ensuring Transparency and Trust-building

JZ: The idea, from the beginning, was that UN Women was only the catalyst. We began by taking on the role of the secretariat that guides, supports, and provides resources to the actors and organizations: We didn't want to interfere in the messaging or the content related to the Feminist Charter. This is why, the final draft [of the Charter], reflects the voice of civil society, rather than us.

The process UN Women tried to use was [to make] everyone equal, no matter the organization or the person. The second thing is constant communication, using WhatsApp and email, knowing many organizations do not operate well through email.

Naturally, members had different approaches and views regarding different issues. One significant stumbling block that created a make-or-break moment for the group issues was the issue of terminology around using prostitution versus sex work. The group was split on this issue, which is very common amongst feminist alliances. We addressed this by including both terms in the document produced, and noting the disagreement; we wrote "women in prostitution/sex worker" and added a footnote highlighting the diverse opinions on the definition and the terminology. We wanted to recognize the diversity in the group while maintaining transparency and openness, and most importantly focusing on this unifying work, the Feminist Charter.

Issuing the Feminist Charter

JZ: We issued the [Feminist Charter] in English and Arabic. It was aimed as a call to action to national and international organizations working to address the impact of the port explosion—a call to not replicate exclusionary models of development and business as usual.

This is how we sold the idea. Historically, women's demands have not been considered a priority and unless we do something, then the response to the blast is sure to be gender blind. When we disseminated the statement to the media, we didn't receive much response. It wasn't picked up the way it should have been. But it had been picked up by different partners in the country and people used [the Charter] to advocate and push for gender-sensitive reforms and to put women at the center of the [recovery] plans.

Mobilizing the Charter

JZ: After releasing the Charter, we held a meeting with the [international] donor community through the Canadian Embassy. We dedicated a session [where] the donor community met with representatives from the group of organizations and actors that developed the Feminist Charter. At this stage, we needed to select representatives. So, we developed a set of criteria for representation.

We also created a process to prepare for these types of meetings. After selecting our representatives, we decided collectively on the messages we wanted to convey. We then started setting up meetings between Charter representatives and key stakeholders to allow them a space for dialogue around reform and women's rights. We can point to specific things the group achieved, including the inclusion of gender analysis and commitments in specific documents and processes.

Next Steps: The Feminist Civil Society Platform and Future Goals

JZ: After this first round, we felt that there was an interest to formalize the Charter group. We didn't know what to call [the group], we just came up with the idea of Feminist Civil Society Platform. Everyone was interested, national and international organizations. We never expected it to generate so much interest. We started getting requests for new members to join—that's why we felt the need to formalize the work of this group in a way that allows it to remain nimble, to develop a road map, specifically about governance, decision-making, and membership.

At that stage, we began conducting consultations and an anonymous survey with those already in the group to see how they would evaluate the work we had already done. We followed up this assessment with in-depth interviews and built the roadmap and governance platform based on that.

During this time, the group had issued a statement of solidarity with Palestine outside of our support to term, following the same process [we used for the Feminist Charter]. The group also issued a statement for the first-year commemoration of the Beirut Blast calling for justice, and after the cabinet formation in October.

What we hope is that this group will become the watchdog for how women's rights and gender equality in the country are being dealt with. And, definitely, there has been a decision in

the group that they would like to go beyond a focus on the Beirut Blast to look at the overall situation of the country, and how they can do this in ways beyond just issuing statements.

There is also the importance of intergenerational dialogue, which we have here in the group. This is a challenge, but also a huge opportunity: We see [this] in every single conversation. We have generational clashes over our approach, the content, the priorities, how daring they would like to be, and being inclusive. But we would like to see this become an open and inclusive space where people agree on a few fundamental priorities and work together to achieve these goals. The everyday challenges of Lebanon—the gas crisis, the electricity, COVID-19, the economy—have made it difficult to meet in person.

The advice to whomever is reading this interview is that this work is labor-intensive, it requires focusing on trust-building, and giving [things] time. Because each person has ideas, their own experiences that need to be acknowledged. But most importantly, raising [women's] voices, and advocating for gender equality necessitate a solid presence on the ground and a solid standing within the feminist community. This is what we want to see.